二十世紀電氣目録

―20セイキデンキモクロク―

結城弘

イラスト―池田和美

美術・背景―長谷百香

Author
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From Shiga Prefecture.
I like to go out and eat here and there.
Recently, I have learned to make chicken nanban.

Twentieth Century Electric Catalog

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This book is a revised and expanded version of the work that won the Encouragement Award in the long novel category at the 8th Kyoto Animation Awards, titled "Twentieth Century Electric Catalog."

Character Introduction

Momokawa Inako

The second daughter of Hyakukawa Brewery in Fushimi, Kyoto. Fifteen years old.
Clumsy and always making mistakes, she is often scolded by her father. Her catchphrase is "Believing is my strong point," and she is a devout girl who believes in gods and Buddhas.

Sakamoto Kihachi

A boy who loves electricity dearly. Fifteen years old.
He ran away from his family temple and is now helping at his uncle's Hōrai Buddhist goods store. Alongside that, he also takes on machine repairs.
As a child, he wrote an "Electricity Catalog."

Riku Kengo

He was a hero who survived the Russo-Japanese War and was nicknamed "Rikujōki."
Twenty-four years old.
He is currently devoted to charity work, and his marriage to Noriko is on hold.

Momokawa Noriko

Inako's older sister. Twenty years old.
Unlike her sister Inako, she is a talented and beautiful woman who can do anything. She has a contentious relationship with her fiancé Riku, always exchanging barbs and engaging in verbal fights.

Mizoe Yōsuke

The eldest son of the wealthy Mitsuzoe store. Twenty-nine years old. He is known by the nickname "Dr. Paikar," and is respected in the field of businessakina. He is searching for the rare book "Electric Catalog."

Sakamoto Seiroku

Kihachi's older brother. His free-spiritednaturehonpou has greatly influenced Kihachi. He loves heights, and his dream is to climb the Eiffel Tower.

Momokawa Jin'emon

Inako's father. Forty-two years old.
He possesses the dignity and presence of a samurai, often scolding Inako with his favorite cane.

1

“The dawn of the twentieth century”

How many people in the Meiji era truly felt the arrival of the new century with this phrase?

The first year of the twentieth century was 1901. In the Meiji era, it was the thirty-fourth year, a year that was not particularly significant for Japan. More than thirty years had passed since the Restoration, and the topknot and swords had finally become things of the past. Indeed, it could be said that Western civilization had permeated quite a bit, but for the Japanese, who had long been accustomed to the era names, the term “twentieth century” was still a rather unfamiliar phrase.

However, precisely because it was unfamiliar, “twentieth century” had a stylish ring to it.

Just as the Murai Brothers Trading Company launched a tobacco called “twentieth century,” merchants eagerly used it as a promotional phrase, and “twentieth century” was actively featured in store banners and advertisements.

I don’t know what the twentieth century is. I don’t know, but since it’s something that great people mention or use as a sales pitch, it must be something auspicious. Riding on auspicious things is what the Yamato spirit is all about.

Just as the sound of civilization and enlightenment was said to resonate when one struck a shorn head, when common people tried saying “twentieth century,” they felt as if they had been transformed into people of a new era.

The term "twentieth century" is new. New words have authority. If you bombard someone clinging to old ideas with the phrase, "From now on, the twentieth century is," you can unilaterally stamp them with the label of "outdated." Indeed, it is a revival of the Nishiki’s banner that boasted immense power in the Boshin War.

With the flag of the twentieth century raised and proclaiming new ideas such as naturalism and women's liberation, the youth strut about, while the people of the old era cheer, "Hey, twentieth century!"

On the first New Year of the twentieth century, at a small temple called Zenshokuji in Otsu, located in Omi Province, they were busy making mochi to offer to the main deity and serving toso and osechi to the visiting followers. It was a typical busy New Year, and there was not a trace of the atmosphere of the twentieth century.

Sakamoto Kihachi , the nine-year-old son of the temple's head priest, was putting his hands together in front of the altar after finishing his chores when his older brother Seiroku approached with a grin.

"Hey, twentieth century, what are you so earnestly doing?"

"I was greeting our ancestors for the New Year," he replied, tilting his head towards Seiroku.

"I've been curious about it for a while, but what is this twentieth century?"

"Oh, so you're interested in the twentieth century?"

Seiroku, shivering in his tanzen from the cold, sat down beside him. Although Seiroku would turn eighteen next month, his smiling face retained a certain youthful innocence.

"Unlike the Gregorian calendar, a century counts as one hundred years. From the birth of Jesus Christ to the year 1900, this year marks the beginning of the twentieth century."

“Why do we have the Gregorian calendar, yet still use such a complicated counting method?”

“I don’t know. Well, since the period is long, it can be succinctly expressed. If it’s a century with many wars, it would be called ‘the century of war,’ and if it’s a century with industrial development, it would be called ‘the century of industry.’”

“Then what kind of century will the twentieth century be?”

“I have something good,” Seiroku said, taking out a newspaper clipping from his pocket and handing it to Kiyohachi.

“Read this. It’s an article predicting what kind of era the twentieth century will be.”

The clipped newspaper contains an article titled ‘Predictions for the Twentieth Century .’

It says,

“With the development of wireless telephones, you can call from Tokyo to New York.”

“A railway with heating and cooling will run between Tokyo and Kobe in two and a half hours.”

and other predictions centered around technological advancements, covering a total of twenty-three items.

“The prediction says, ‘Electricity will become the fuel instead of firewood and coal,’ but what does that mean?”

“Of course, the telephone, the locomotive, the temperature control machine, and the camera, all run on electricity.”

Electricity.

Just like in the twentieth century, electricity was also something unfamiliar to Kihachi.

When I hear electricity, I think of electric light, but it’s not something that common people can easily access; in this house, we still use oil lamps for light. So, when I went to see the electric light that first lit up the town of Ōtsu four years ago with Seiroku, I was amazed by the brightness that was far greater than lamps or candles.

That smoke-free, mysterious light marks the era of machines.

“I see, the twentieth century is the century of electricity.”

Seiroku was taken aback by Kihachi's words, but soon he smiled, showing his white teeth.

“That’s right. The twentieth century is the century of electricity.”

Kihachi, feeling a flutter in his chest, took an unfilled booklet from the chest of drawers in the back room.

“I’ll try writing a prophecy for the twentieth century too.”

Originally, in the folded book where sacred words like sutras and norito are written, Kihachi's clumsy handwriting was inscribed with a pencil. Eventually, after finishing writing, Seiroku peeked inside the contents.

“‘The First Night Unaware ’… The clothing of electric light. You can walk the night road without holding a lamp.”

Seiroku urged, “Write more,” and Kihachi quickly added two more items.

“‘The Second Photo Artifact ’… The spirits of ancestors and family appear in photos illuminated by electric light. ‘The Third Electric Cannon ’… Moves a person at the speed of lightning .”

Upon reading that far, Seiroku burst into laughter. Kihachi, with a sulky face, said, “If you’re going to make fun of me, don’t read it,” and tried to hide the folded book, but it was snatched away by Seiroku before he could.

“Wait. Since it’s a good opportunity, I’ll give this prophecy book a title.”

Without being asked, Seiroku quickly ground the ink and began to hum.

“From what I read in this prophecy, it seems you have an interest in electricity… Alright, I’ve decided.”

He then wrote a note on the cover of the folded book and handed it to Kihachi.

‘Electric Catalog’

That was the name of Kihachi’s prophecy book.

“Now, write down some predictions about electricity there. Make it twenty, in honor of the twentieth century.”

Two years passed since that exchange between the brothers, in the year 1903, Meiji 36.

Enduring the early summer's humidity, Kihachi was curled up inside the storehouse .

The storehouse door was tightly shut, and inside it was musty and eerily quiet, with the May dolls, old furniture, and Buddhist altar items lurking in the darkness, seeming like monsters silently targeting him.

Leaning against the wall and closing his eyes tightly, he exhaled roughly when he heard the sound of the latch at the entrance of the storehouse coming undone, causing Kihachi to jump. The Kannon door swung open vigorously, blinding him with bright light.

“Hey, twentieth century. What are you doing cooped up in such a gloomy place?”

A triumphant voice echoed, and as he opened his eyes slightly, he saw Seiroku standing at the entrance of the storehouse, arms crossed.

“Brother, what are you doing here? What about the shop?”

“I got a day off, so I came back. Have you been locked up in the storehouse again?”

“...This morning during my duties , I was daydreaming and got scolded terribly by Dad.”

“That old man, there's no way the generous Amitabha would get angry over something like that.”

“You say that. Even though my brother doesn’t believe in paradise or Buddha at all.”

“I’m a firm believer in not trusting what I can’t see,” Seiroku laughed heartily.

Despite being the child of a temple, Seiroku refuses to believe in any gods or Buddhas. Because of this, he has often clashed with his father, Kumagorō—the head priest of Zenshokuji—and after graduating from a commercial school in Ōtsu, he worked as a live-in employee at his uncle’s Buddhist goods store in Kyoto.

Since Seiroku rarely visits home, it had been several months since they last met.

“More importantly, it’s rare to see you daydreaming at work.”

“...I was thinking about what kind of place paradise is.”

The principal deity of Zenshokuji, Amitabha, is a Buddha who saves people with infinite light, no matter where they are or even if they are in the darkness of ignorance. The country created by Amitabha is called the Pure Land.

It is said that paradise exists ten million billion Buddha lands to the west of this world. It is a place filled with beautiful flowers and music, where birds like celestial maidens sing, and it is a world free of all suffering, constantly enveloped in the light of Amitabha.

The main hall, where the principal deity is enshrined, is decorated with golden ornaments and is said to represent paradise. It is a daily routine for Enki and me to perform rituals in the main hall morning and evening, but this morning, while gazing at that palace, I found myself lost in thought about paradise and mistakenly recited the sacred texts I was supposed to chant.

Seiroku suddenly noticed something that Kihachi was holding to his chest and quickly pulled it out.

“I wondered what you were holding dear, and it turns out to be an electrical catalog.”

As Kiyoroku easily dodged Kihachi's attempt to retrieve it, he opened it up and laughed heartily.

“‘Number Electric Delivery ’… it automatically delivers things hanging from the electric wires.”

However, when he turned to the next page , the laughter stopped, and he frowned in boredom, pushing the electrical catalog back.

“Is this all there is? It’s not even half full.”

“I don’t know anything about electricity yet,” Kihachi pouted.

“It’s just like paradise. You can’t understand what you’ve never seen.”

“Well, then it’s just right.”

For some reason, Kiyoroku’s expression brightened as he extended his hand against the light streaming in from outside.

“I’ll take you to paradise now.”

“...Where to?”

“It’s paradise, paradise. If you don’t understand, the best way is to see it for yourself.”

“Are you thinking of committing double suicide?”

“ Fool , are you going to the other side of the Western Pure Land of a hundred billion Buddhas? Even in the West, it takes about two hours by train.”

“Is there really a paradise that close? It’s not like we’re going to see a play…”

Kihachi, holding his head, suddenly remembered something he must not forget and raised his pale face.

“Have you told Dad?”

“What are you talking about? I’m sneaking out quietly. I haven’t even told him I’m back.”

“You can’t do that; you’ll definitely get burned later.”

“I won’t die, so it’s fine. Trust me.”

Even so, as he hesitated, he was forcibly pulled by Seiroku, who said, “Let’s go already.”

“If I stay cooped up in a store like this, my future is pitch dark.”

When I stepped outside the store, the strong sunlight dazzled me. Before I knew it, the garden trees were covered in lush and, without realizing it, it had completely turned into the season of summer outside.

“If I was going to go quietly, I should have gone to Ise.”

As Kihachi grumbled while sitting on the hard train seat, Seiroku laughed beside him, “Are you sneaking out?”

In the past, when the pilgrimage to Ise became popular among the common people, even apprenticesdechi and wives would secretly slip out of their homes to visit Ise, which is why the pilgrimage was also called a sneaking out. Those who returned from the sneaking out were said to have received the divine virtue of prosperous business, so it seems there were no reprimands from their masters.

“If it was sneaking out, maybe Dad would forgive me. Anyway, where I'm going now is just like a stall at a festival. I wouldn't be surprised by something like that.”

“Then where would you take me that would surprise me?”

After thinking for a moment, the streets of France I had seen on a postcard came to mind.

The pure white majesticArc de Triomphe, the brilliantdecorations of the Palace of Versailles, and the Eiffel Tower stretching straight up to the sky. A foreign landscape

that seemed completely different from Japan, a place that felt otherworldly.

“Yeah, if you took me to France, I would be surprised.”

He chuckled to himself, thinking this would be troublesome, but Seiroku, far from being confused, only looked more pleased with himself.

“Well, then it’s just right.”

Several hours later, Kihachi was in France.

In front of the relieved Kihachi stood a huge white-painted gate that resembled the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

As he recalled that he had indeed gotten off the train in Umeda, Osaka, and walked to Tenno , Seiroku, standing next to him, puffed out his chest and said, "Aren't you surprised?"

"This is the venue for the fifth National Industrial Exhibition."

The National Industrial Exhibition was Japan's " Exposition " held five times since the Meiji era.

Since the opening of the country, Japan had been absorbing Western culture and technology in an effort to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Western powers, steadily gaining the strength to become a first-class nation. However, there were still things that Japan had not achieved compared to Western countries.

One of these was the holding of the World Exposition, commonly known as the "Expo."

While Western countries were eagerly holding expos to introduce the latest technologies and promote industries, it was an impossible task for Japan, which only had immature technology, to hold an expo. As an alternative, Japan held its own expo, the National Industrial Exhibition.

The exhibition gained popularity with each passing event, and this year, in the 36th year of the Meiji era (1903), the fifth National Industrial Exhibition, touted as the largest in history, was being held in Tennoji, Osaka.

──However, Kihachi learned this later, and at that moment, he felt as if he had been caught in a divine abduction.

As Kiyoroku used the admission ticket he had bought in advance to pass through the gate, he emerged onto a wide avenue with flower beds and fountains in the center. The spacious avenue, with depth, was crowded with visitors, and on both sides stood white Western-style buildings adorned with intricate decorations.

"It seems that this entire building is an exhibition hall. Let's first check out that machinery hall over there,"

Upon entering the machinery hall, a thunderous noise that could be mistaken for a demon's snore assaulted his ears. Overwhelmed by the smell of iron and oil, he witnessed the black, shiny machines producing soap and tobacco among other things.

Most of the machines here seemed to be powered by electricity, and while enjoying the breeze from the electric fan, which alleviated the stuffiness inside the hall, Kiyohachi was simply astonished by the power of electricity that moved the various machines.

Just as he began to get accustomed to the machines, he was taken aback in the next hall, the Hall of Wonders.

The exhibits were all mysterious, and during the demonstration of the wireless telegraph machine, he was frightened by the invisible radio waves, and during the demonstration of X-rays, he was stunned to see the light that penetrated the skin of the human body and revealed the bones.

"I can't take it anymore, it's scary, I want to go home,"

As Kiyohachi sulked, Kiyoroku said, "Then let's stop by here last," and led him to the adjacent theater.

In the pitch-dark audience, as many guests stirred, Kiyohachi began to feel anxious about what was about to start. Just then, the stage was illuminated, and a Western lady in a white dress began to dance to the music.

The lady, spreading her white dress like wings, was illuminated by lights of various colors, transforming the dress into shades of blue and purple. It was a beautiful dance reminiscent of butterflies and flowers—an electric fire dance by actress Karmanseira, and Kiyohachi was quickly captivated by it.

“That dance was really great! I want to see it again !”

After the performance, Kihachi, still buzzing with excitement, was carried outside by Seiroku, who, unusually, wore a troubled expression and said, "I don't have that much

money." By that time, Kihachi's fear had completely transformed into curiosity.

In the exhibition hall presented by Canada, canned fruits and boxes of sweets were stacked high, almost reaching the ceiling.

As Kihachi looked up at the tower of sweets with longing, Seiroku, who had been smiling wryly, bought him a tin of biscuits wrapped in a red ribbon. As soon as he popped one into his mouth, the coarse texture and exquisite sweetness spread throughout his mouth.

The merry-go-round was a thrilling attraction where wooden horses continued to spin in a circle. While riding on the horse's pedestal, Kihachi laughed innocently with Seiroku and the surrounding children and adults.

Having thoroughly enjoyed the exhibition to its corners , the two finally arrived at the observation deck of the Ōbayashi Tower .

From the observation deck, not only could they see the entire venue bathed in the colors of dusk, but they could also overlook the cityscape of Osaka, with its factory chimneys sprouting like split ends, and even as far north as Minoh .

"What a spectacular view, Kihachi! I think we can even see Kyoto from here,"

"The scenery is amazing, but I was also astonished by the 'box' we rode to get here."

At the Ōbayashi Tower, which stands fifty meters tall, a vehicle called an "elevator" in the West was used to travel to the observation floor, and Kihachi was amazed by its convenience.

"Just like the machines on display, that one is powered by electricity too."

“Electricity is amazing, isn’t it? It can carry humans to such high places.”

“Still, Japan's technology has a long way to go. We lost to the Paris Exposition Universelle three years ago.”

Seiroku spoke about the Paris Exposition Universelle held in 1900. There, moving pathways carried people, and a Ferris wheel that was over a hundred meters tall became a topic of conversation.

“Ah, I want to go to Paris,” Seiroku sighed while gazing at the scenery.

“I want to climb the Eiffel Tower at least once.”

“You still love going to high places, don’t you?”

In the corner of the evening sky, a faint moon floated, and Kihachi was recalling the moving picture he had just seen for the first time. It was based on a novel by the French author Verne, telling the story of Westerners shot to the moon in a giant cannonball in “ A Trip to the Moon .”

“In that moving picture, there were no mochi -pounding rabbits.”

“What’s wrong with you? Do you still believe that rabbits pound ?”

“You don’t believe in that kind of thing at all, do you? You even say there’s no paradise.”

“ How many times should I say it? I’m a person who doesn’t believe in things I can’t see.”

“...Is there paradise? Then where do humans go when they die if there’s no paradise?”

With a worried look in his eyes, Kihachi felt Seiroku place a hand on his head and replied shortly, “I don’t know.”

“But you know, I plan to go to the moon when I die. I’ll go to the moon, the highest place on this earth, and see if the rabbits are really making rice cakes.”

As he said this, Seiroku wore his usual proud smile. I thought that smile seemed darker than usual, and I noticed the sun had tilted significantly, deepening the crimson of the western sky. Night was coming soon.

After descending from the high tower, the two headed towards the main gate to return home. The bell signaling closing time rang, and visitors from each exhibition hall gathered in the main street. The bustling atmosphere before sunset in an unfamiliar land made Kihachi feel even more anxious, and he wanted to go home quickly, but Seiroku’s pace was slow beside him.

As Kihachi felt increasingly impatient, Seiroku suddenly stopped.

“Sorry, let me go to the restroom for a moment.”

Kihachi almost exclaimed “Okay,” but not wanting to be teased for feeling anxious, he reluctantly nodded instead. Seiroku said, “I’ll be back in about five minutes,” and ran off.

Kihachi sat on a long bench near the fountain tower and opened the can he had bought at the Canada Pavilion.

He felt a bit regretful that the red ribbon tying the can was gone without him noticing, but as he bit into the sweet biscuit, his gloomy feelings quickly vanished. While nibbling on the precious biscuit, five minutes passed in no time.

“Is the restroom crowded?”

After finishing all the biscuits and waiting for ten, fifteen, thirty, and forty minutes, I began to notice something was off. I stood up from the long bench and looked around, but there were no familiar faces in the crowd.

The sun had completely set. As the white rock buildings gradually darkened and turned a deep blue, the heat left Kihachi's body, and a restless feeling began to stir in his chest.

“Brother!”

I shouted out loud, but there was no response, which only heightened my anxiety. Realizing I was alone in a strange place at night, I felt my teeth start to chatter, and tears began to spill from my eyes.

Would I never be able to return home like this? I didn’t want that. If I could return safely, I wouldn’t mind getting as many punches from my father as he wanted.

Fear of being attacked by something lurking in the darkness made Kihachi freeze. He crouched down on the spot and desperately chanted “ Namu Amida , Namu Amida Buddha” over and over with a tear-streaked face.

It could be at Ise Shrine, or with Amida, or anyone else.

“Someone, please blow away this darkness.”

2

At the Inari Mountain in Fushimi, Kyoto, there is a famous shrine dedicated to the god of prosperous business, Inari Shrine.

In addition to the main shrine at the foot of the mountain, there are numerous subsidiary shrines and burial mounds scattered throughout the mountain. Even in the year 1907, the belief in the spirits residing in these shrines and mounds as the household deities was prevalent.

The approach, which stretches like a thread connecting the burial mounds and miraclesshinseki, is lined with countless red torii gates. The path, which can almost be called a mountain trail, is steep, and MomokawaInako was running up it, enduring the sweltering heat of August.

Wearing a dark blue kasuri kimono cinched with a canola flower-colored obi, and with an obi clasp shaped like a rat and a rice bale, Inako's braided hair, tied in a single knot at the back, bounced with every step. The sounds of cicadas, the rustling of leaves, and the chanting of norito from the burial mounds and subsidiary shrines echoed throughout the mountains, accompanied by the clattering of Inako's wooden sandals.

After climbing the long stairs from the Yotsutsuji at the halfway point and passing through a dense thicket of trees where the burial mounds are clustered, I emerged into a slightly open area. From there, I could see the Kyoden train crossing the Kamo River on the Kanjin Bridge, the barracks of the 38th Infantry Regiment in Fukakusa, and the Shichijo station.

In this scenic spot is the burial mound dedicated to the deity Akubi. The slope of the mountain here has some exposed rock faces, and attached to the rock wall is a donation box and a modest pedestal, on which many small and large torii gates and offerings are dedicated.

Facing the burial mound, Inako inserted a coin, bowed twice, clapped her hands twice, and then took a deep breath.

"May I succeed next time."

She tightly closed her eyes and rubbed her hands together as if to spark a fire.

"Please don't let me be clumsy. I hope I won't be scolded by Father this time. May the strings of my shamisen not break. I wish to become a beautiful girl like my sister soon. And also—"

After praying until she felt satisfied, Inako began to chant the Great Purification .

“ Takamanohara is where Kaminari resides sits as the divine deity Kamurogi Kamuromi commands life —”

The scent of candles drifts in the air, and as my voice blends with the sounds of cicadas and the rustling of trees, I realize that this is a place where gods reside, far from the usual noise , and my heart begins to feel at ease.

Then, to accompany the voice of Inako, the sound of Kagura began to be heard from somewhere.

Wondering if there was a Kagura hall nearby, Inako chanted a prayer while trying to locate the source of the sound, but strangely, the music seemed to be coming from the thicket above the rock wall.

As Inako looked up, the sound stopped, and a dull voice said, “Ah.”

Just as the thicket above the rock wall shook violently, a boy suddenly slid down with great force.

The boy, who fell while screaming, kicked the dedicated torii aside with his rear end and landed on the ground. Clutched to the chest of the groaning boy was a box-shaped machine.

Inako, stunned by the sudden event, placed her hand over her mouth.

“Finally, the gods have descended to us…!”

Joy bubbled up within Inako as she put her hands together and began to fervently pray to the boy.

“ Akubi Great God of Akubi, Great God of Akubi, please grant our wish—”

“What a fool ”

The boy cheerfully struck the head of Inako with a part resembling a trumpet that he had removed from the machine.

“Ouch! What are you doing?”

“This is my line . Is there anyone who would pray for a person who has fallen off a cliff without providing any assistance?”

Once Inako regained her composure, she observed the boy closely. Dressed in a shirt under a cotton kasurikasuri and wearing KokuraKokura trousers hakama, he looked just like an ordinary boy. Realizing this, Inako hurriedly bowed her head.

“I’m sorry ; I thought my faith had been rewarded and that a god had appeared.”

“How could you come to such a conclusion?”

The boy sighed and attached the trumpet he was holding back to the machine. As Inako watched him curiously, the boy asked, “Is this your first time seeing a phonograph?”

The boy placed the phonograph on the pedestal of the shrine, grasped the handle on the side, and wound the spring. Once finished, the tube mounted horizontally in the center began to spin vigorously, and as soon as he placed the thin needle attached to the trumpet—later learned to be called a horn—against the tube, Kagura burst forth from the horn.

“That was the [[1]]Kagura[[2]]Kagura[[/2]][[/1]] from earlier. Amazing! How does it play sound on its own?”

The boy stopped the phonograph, pulled out a tube like a chikuwa, and gently placed it in Inako's palm.

“This is a wax cylinder you see. It has fine grooves carved on the surface. You place the needle here, and it plays back the sound recorded by those vibrations. Since it's a singing wax cylinder, it costs just a little over one yen.”

Startled by the price, the wax cylinder slipped from Inako's hand. Just before it hit the ground, the boy managed to catch it and looked genuinely worried as he said, “You idiot, didn’t I tell you not to drop it?”

“I-I’m sorry. But it’s surprising; that’s about the price of a hundred rides on the Kyoto Electric Railway.”

“Even so, it’s cheaper than a flat disc . Plus, the wax cylinder has some interesting features.”

The boy attached another wax cylinder he took from his pocket to the phonograph, but unlike before, no sound came out.

“It’s not making any sound, is it broken?” Inako tilted her head curiously , and the boy returned the needle to its original position.

‘It’s not making any sound, is it broken?’

Startled by the sound of her own voice coming from the phonograph, Inako was taken aback, and the boy smiled with satisfaction.

“This is the great thing about wax cylinder phonographs; anyone can easily record like this.”

“What an amazing machine you have. Why are you carrying something like that around?”

“I was entrusted with the phonograph from Mr. Ujiko nearby for repairs, and I was testing it on the mound before delivering it. Then I accidentally slipped and fell.”

“Ah, so that’s why earlier—”

Just as the atmosphere was about to soften, Inako finally noticed the chaotic state of the torii and offerings scattered around the mound and shouted, “What a sacrilegious thing to do!”

Inako, visibly angry, made the boy frown and ask, “Sacrilege?” The boy, who had covered the phonograph with a lid and lifted it with a handle , cast a contemptuous glance at Inako.

“Unfortunately, I’m a firm believer in not trusting what I can’t see.”

As the boy tried to walk away, Inako quickly grabbed his obi and pointed at the scattered torii on the ground.

“If you made a mess, I think it’s only right to clean it up, regardless of faith.”

While making a sour face , the boy rearranged the torii and other items back to their original state and put his hands together towards the mound.

—He does know how to pray properly. Just as Inako was impressed, she was taken aback by the boy’s gaze.

The boy, with his hands still together, glared at the mound with eyes filled with hatred.

It was a terrifying gaze, as if looking at the enemy of my parents. Without bowing, the boy turned on his heel and left, saying, "Well then, that's that," as if nothing had happened.

Startled, Inako hurriedly began to recite the continuation of the norito to apologize to the mound for the boy's disrespect.

" Great Yamato, Land of Takamikuni —"

Perhaps it was because the boy's fierce demeanor was burned into her mind. The words of the norito, which she should have perfectly memorized, slipped away. As she struggled to remember,

"Designating the Great Yamato, Land of Takamikuni as Yasukuni and offering "

From a short distance away, the boy continued the norito. After casting a mocking glance at the astonished Inako, he walked away.

──What was that guy!

Having finished her visit to Akubi Daimeijin, Inako was puffing her cheeks as she walked down the path.

After having her mound disturbed to the point of receiving help from a faithless person, it was the utmost humiliation.

As she grew more irritated and passed through the forest, she reached the foothills where wooden fences lined the road, and there stood a beggar leaning against the fence. The beggar's white garments revealed a foot that was only one.

Inako stopped in front of the beggar and asked, "Excuse me, but what about that left foot...?"

“I lost it in the Russo-Japanese War.”

As Inako had predicted, the beggar was a wounded soldier from the Russo-Japanese War.

“Is this area home to the Fourth Division ?”

“Yes. During the general assault on Hill 203 three years ago, enemy shells exploded nearby…”

As memories of the battlefield resurfaced , the beggar's lips trembled, and by the end, his voice was almost hoarse. Seeing this, Inako unhesitatingly took out her last penny from her pouch.

“Um, this is a little, but…”

“...Thank you very much.”

The beggar reached for Inako's penny, but suddenly let out a strange cry, “Kieee!”

In front of a startled Inako, the beggar twisted his body, and from behind the wall, his left leg, which should have been lost, appeared. A centipede was wrapped around his ankle, and ignoring the frozen Inako, the beggar dashed down the approach.

Looking at the wall where the beggar had been standing, there was a hole at a low position where a leg could fit through.

“Did you put your foot in here and pretend to lose one?”

“That’s right, you fool ”

As I was peering into the hole, I suddenly screamed as a face appeared from the other side, and this time Inako fell back in shock. The boy from earlier was laughing through the hole and gracefully jumped over the fence.

“The Fourth Division hasn’t gone to Hill 203. You were about to be deceived spectacularly.”

“You are the one from earlier—”

“I saw you listening intently to the story of a rather suspicious man on your way back from delivering the phonograph. Just at that moment, a centipede was crawling on the ground, so I thought I’d burn you.”

Remembering the centipede from earlier gave me goosebumps. Ever since I was stung as a child, I’ve had a fear of centipedes.

“That aside, I expect a generous reward for getting rid of it.”

As the boy twisted his mouth, Inako glanced at the one sen in her hand and hesitated before thrusting it out.

“I only have one sen, though.”

The boy hesitated, as Inako's reaction was unexpected, saying, "Don't take jokes seriously."

“This is our thank you. You helped me when I was about to be deceived.”

“A single penny is more than enough.”

“Then this is an offering to the godgod. I was helpedby a god who loves mischief.”

Eventually, the boy, who had been worn down, reluctantly accepted the penny and tilted his head, saying, “Thank you, um…”

“Me? I’m Inako Hyakkawa.”

“…Inago?”

“It’s Inako!” Inako kicked the boy’s shin.

“W-What was that for? How rude.”

“Who’s being rude here? So, what’s your name?”

The boy, with tears in the corners of his eyes, still maintained a proud smile as he spoke.

“Sakamoto, Kihachi ”

Since we were on the same way home, I ended up walking down the approach with the boy who introduced himself as Kihachi.

He was a little taller than Inako, and we were both fifteen years old. He was born in a temple in Otsu and was attending a middle school in Kyoto while helping at a relative's shop, and he mentioned that he was currently on summer vacation.

The conversation shifted to the wax cylinder phonograph, and when Inako tilted her head and asked, “Who is this ‘Edison’?” Kihachi looked shocked.

“You don’t know Edison? He’s the god of invention!”

“Huh, a god? What benefits does he provide? Where is he enshrined ?”

“Don’t just assume he’s dead; he’s doing well in America.”

In that case, Inako clasped her hands together, probably facing the direction of America.

“I thought maybe if I prayed, I could receive some benefit.”

“Then why not visit Hachiman Shrine? It seems that Edison used bamboo from that area as the filament material for incandescent bulbs back in the day, and that led to his great success.”

“Fira... I don't know what it is, but it seems like it has some benefits. I should go visit next time.”

“‘I hope it goes well,’ you’re asking?”

In response to Kihachi's wry smile, Inako felt her cheeks heat up with determination. It seemed that her earlier prayer had been overheard.

“...If I make a mistake like today again, I might just ask for that.”

Inako was born as the second daughter of Hyakukawa Brewery, which produces sake in Fushimi.

Her father Jin'emon was a man who embodied the spirit of the old samurai, and from a young age, Inako was drilled in various manners and lessons. While her older sister adeptly handled her studies, Inako, who was naturally clumsy, made blunders almost every day, each time earning the wrath of Jin'emon.

Particularly terrible was the incident this morning.

With an important guest arriving in the evening, the whole family was busy cleaning. Inako was using a small kanadarai filled with oil to catch flies, but she remembered another task midway and left the fly trap in the hallway.

Immediately afterward, there was a loud crash in the hallway. Thinking it couldn't be, she returned to find Jin'emon, with the overturned kanadarai on his head, dripping with oil and covered in flies, waiting with a furious expression.

“After being yelled at thoroughly, I was told, ‘This just adds to the cleaning,’ and was chased out.”

Kihachi was laughing so hard he was nearly choking, but regrettably, Inako had no excuses to offer.

The two descended the mountain and arrived at the back approach. The souvenir shops along the road displayed the famous Fushimi dolls, and tea shops selling ice water and sweet sake were lined up.

Kihachi, feeling a bit hungry, took out a biscuit wrapped in paper and began to nibble on it with his front teeth. He was offered another one, but it looked like a cheap, low-quality item, so he politely declined.

"Is it because the locusts visit that mound, since we have Akubi Daimeijin enshrined at home?"

"No, that's not it. Our family's mound is Gozendani . We visit Akubi-san's mound because... when our faith is recognized, we receive a letter from Akubi-san."

Kihachi grimaced while nibbling on the biscuit, and for some reason, he distanced himself a little from Inako.

"I see... yeah... there are indeed strange things in this world."

The gaze directed at him was filled with pity . It was a face that clearly thought he was a crazy person.

"It's true. When I was a child, I received a letter from Akubi-san addressed to my older sister."

"I've heard of believers living far away sending prayer letters, but I've never heard of receiving one from a god."

Inako pouted, thinking that she really had received a letter from a god.

“Anyway, Akubi is the reason I go to see her. Also, I have her listen to my grumbles . I’m clumsy, so I have few friends, and I ask the gods to listen to me. The offering is a consultation fee.”

“Do you really think God will listen to your complaints?”

“Believing is our only strong point.”

With a confident look on his face, Kihachi brushed off the biscuit crumbs from his hands and said, “Hmm.”

“Why were you at Akuka-san's mound?”

“The deity we worship at home is Akuka Daimyōjin. My grandmother received this deity through her training long ago.”

It is said that if you train under a person named Odai at Inari , you will receive the power of the deity of the mound. Despite being a temple, Kihachi's family has a special shrine enshrined on the altar that contains a divine spirit , which was bestowed upon his grandmother. He was taught repeatedly, “Never open the shrine, or the deity will escape,” so he and his brother referred to this shrine as the “unopenable shrine.”

Just as I was impressed that he was dutifully paying his respects, Kihachi laughed and denied it.

“The view is great. I often sit there and eat my lunch.”

With such disrespectful words, Inako thought again, I really dislike this guy.

When they arrived at the Kyoto Electric Railway stop, a train that looked like white and brown uirō was stopped. This train, which rings a bell during operation, is affectionately known as Kyoden by the people.

Several years ago, there was a boy called Sakihashiri who ran in front of the train, warning those around him by saying, "The train is coming, it's dangerous!" However, due to the danger and hard labor involved, Sakihashiri was abolished a few years ago, and instead, accident prevention rescue nets have been installed at the front and back of the train.

“Yeah. Since it’s a special occasion, I might as well give it to you.”

Kihachi, who was about to board the train, stopped and handed over the ticket. Along with a picture of the Seven Lucky Gods, it had the name ' Hōrai Buddhist Goods Store' and the phrase 'Machine Repair Shikō ' along with the address, and unusually, it also included a phone number.

“If your mechanical products break, please favor us. The first time, I’ll treat you to some delicious biscuits.”

Although it was a Buddhist goods store, the mention of machine repair made me wonder what was going on, when suddenly, the bell rang, ding ding.

“If you have any complaints, bring a penny. I’ll listen in place of a god whose presence is uncertain.”

Kihachi jokingly said this and jumped onto the moving train, leaving.

“You’re saying something disrespectful again.”

As I angrily glanced at the ticket, I noticed something was written on the back.

“‘Electric Catalog’…?”

Along with that sentence, on the back, there are scribbled words and descriptions like ' Night Unaware ' and ' Electric Cannon ', and there are also drawings resembling blueprints. There are parts that have been crossed out with slashes, making it seem like some sort of notes. I wondered if this was something I should have received, but since I had no way to return it, Inako tidied up the tag while feeling uneasy.

Inari Shrine, heading south, passing through Fujinomiya , and reaching the area of Sumizome , I arrived at the entrance of the flower district.

Gion and Shimabara are much smaller in comparison, but it is an old flower district with stories of the loyal retainer Oishi Kuranosuke having passed through. It should be quiet during the day, but today I heard lively singing.

“This is a battle to save our brethren from ruin——”

“The Salvation Army is here.”

A group dressed in navy military hats and uniforms, embroidered with “Salvation Army,” was marching down the street lined with brothels , playing trumpets and drums to the tune of the Salvation Army song “This is for our brethren.”

Since the Prostitution Abolition Act was enacted in Meiji 5 (1872), human trafficking has been prohibited, but many women still fall into red-light districts due to poverty and unemployment.

The main organization leading the anti-prostitution movement is the Salvation Army, composed of Protestant Christians.

Despite having “Army” in its name, its activities are purely peaceful, and they are currently engaged in street preaching called Yamato Yama and Sen Sen, distributing magazines and flyers to passersby as if they were shooting bullets at them.

Suddenly, I spotted someone I thought I knew at the front, and as I tried to run over, a bald man shouted, “What do you think you’re doing?” blocking the procession, and I hurriedly hid behind a wooden tub stacked under the eaves.

“What kind of mindset do you have to be interfering with other people's business, huh?”

“We have come to rescue women who are being treated unfairly.”

The leading man is much larger and sturdier than the others, to the point where he could be mistaken for a Westerner.

“You are sinners just like us; unless you repent, you cannot become true humans. Wake up quickly.”

“My eyes have been open for a long time. You keep saying incomprehensible things every time.”

“The law recognizes the freedom of prostitutes to cease operations, and it is also prohibited to hinder that. If you come to us, we will provide you with training for social reintegration.”

A cigarette tray thrown from the second-floor window of the brothel struck the Salvation Army man on the head. When his military cap fell off, revealing his short-cropped hair, he looked up at the second floor without showing any sign of pain.

“As I thought, it’s Riku .”

The large man was Kengo Riku, whom Inako knew well. As Riku brushed off the ash from his military uniform, a group of other men emerged from the brothel, laughing, and quickly surrounded the formation.

“Let’s get them!” the men shouted as they charged at the Salvation Army, causing an uproar in the red-light district.

Amidst the swirling dust, several men were attacking the Salvation Army, but they showed no signs of resistance, while Riku patiently called out, “Hear our voices.”

As I was worried about Riku, the bald head from earlier turned a sharp gaze at Inako, and like a frog stared by a snake frog , I froze in place. Just then, the bald head came over and roughly grabbed my wrist, causing me to let out a small scream, and Riku, noticing Inako, stopped calling out.

Riku, who had been dazed, quickly turned serious as he sensed the situation. At that moment, two men from either side lunged at him simultaneously.

Transformed into the form of Fudō Myōō, Riku effortlessly grabbed their arms and tossed them aside with ease.

The men hesitated as their comrade flew over their heads. Riku charged through the surrounding men, scattering them, and rushed to Inako, grabbing the chest of the bald with one hand.

To Inako, who had slumped down to the ground, Riku said in a very gentle voice.

“I didn’t expect to see you here. Just stay still.”

The bald man thrown by Riku ended up headfirst in a pile of wooden barrels, becoming trapped under the collapsed barrels.

Once again, Riku dashed off, grabbing the necks of the men attacking his comrades and tossing them one after another, while dragging the men who clung to him like a locomotive would as he ran around freely.

“Just like the nickname ‘ Riku Jōki ’ suggests.”

During the Russo-Japanese War, Riku had achieved military exploits in numerous fierce battlefields such as Nanzan and Fengtian. He was nicknamed “Riku Jōki” due to his fearless charge, even against the enemy's Maxim machine guns, reflecting the meaning of his name “Riku.”

There was no one left in this red-light district who could stop Riku, and soon the men fled into the brothel like spiderlings scattering. Finally calming down, Riku exchanged a few brief words with his comrades, and the Salvation Army, having organized their ranks, left the red-light district, leaving Riku behind.

“Inako-kun, am I hurt?”

As I watched the Salvation Army leave, Riku came over, adjusting his military cap and brushing off the dust from his uniform. The angry expression had completely faded,

returning to his usual stern look.

“Thanks to you. I really appreciate your help.”

“As long as you’re safe, that’s what matters. It’s not good to stand here chatting, so let’s head out for now.”

Prompted by Riku, the two of them left the flower district. They headed south and soon reached a bridge that crossed the Sumizome Incline, where a cart was just pulling up a boat that was being lifted by a cable.

“Earlier, the tobacco tray hit my head, but are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but what happened afterward is not good. Forcing someone to submit by strength is not the right way of preaching.”

“But thanks to that, I was saved.”

“I wonder about that. My bad habit is to rush in without thinking ahead.”

“Well, if you don’t mind, please stop by my house. I’d like to express my gratitude.”

In response to Inako's invitation, Riku made a sour face .

“I think my sister is at home too.”

“It’s troublesome because she is,” Riku muttered, and Inako frowned as if to say she was still the same.

“Please don’t hold back. Let’s enjoy my sister’s delicious tea together.”

Just moved her eyebrows and reluctantly followed Inako, who started to walk around.

At the main house of Hyakukawa Sake Brewery, there is a strange machine called Ryoufu. It’s a rectangular box with a uchiwa fan inserted into it, which moves up and down when wound up, sending out a breeze. However, in reality, it sends a lukewarm wind every time it’s used, and it feels cooler after the spring is cut off instead.

Perhaps this Ryoufu device finally showed its power, as the air in the guest room was surprisingly cool for summer.

Between Riku and Shitan , their sister Noriko sat upright in a formal posture.

With her fair skin and long shiny black hair hanging straight down, part of her back hair was tied with a red ribbon. She wore a summer kimono made of high-quality kiji called Oumi jōfu , with a white kasuri pattern, neatly secured with a purple obi.

As Riku sipped the tea brewed by Noriko, her previously closed eyes opened with a glare.

“I was surprised when you suddenly came over; I wondered what was going on.”

“I was told to take it a bit slower. I can't just refuse bluntly, can I?”

“That strange uniform, are you getting involved in unnecessary things again?”

“The Salvation Army's Kyoto unit was established this year, and I was asked by an acquaintance to help out for a while.”

“I've heard that the pension from the medal I earned in the war is being used for various things.”

“I’m not using it for leisure. I’m mostly dedicating it to charity activities contributing .”

“Chasing after courtesans, what a splendid charitable activity that is.”

“What do you mean?” A fierce spark flew from their exchanged glances, and Inako placed her hand on her forehead.

Riku was decided as Noriko's marriage partner before the Russo-Japanese War began. Riku is the second son of the rice Riku Tsunekichi store in Otsu, which supplies rice for sake brewing, and has been familiar with Noriko since she was a child.

However, unfortunately, the two had a contentious relationship. Riku has always interfered with Noriko's every move, and Noriko has responded with sarcastic and sharp words. Still, they have met face-to-face many times out of obligation, and I thought they would hold a wedding after Riku's honorable discharge at the end of last year, but there are still no signs of that.

Some people speculate that Noriko put a stop to the marriage because she was fed up Riku's dedication to charity activities, but when Inako asked Noriko for the details, she wouldn’t tell her anything.

This year, Riku is twenty-four, and Noriko is twenty, yet both of them are still single.

At the moment when the glare reached its peak, the cool breeze device stopped. Riku frowned and gave the cool breeze device a glance.

“I’ve been wondering for a while, why didn’t you buy a battery-operated electric fan[[/1]?”

“Because it was cheaper than the electric fan, I suppose. It’s a classic case of buying cheap goods.”

Riku nodded in agreement, finished the remaining tea, and set down the teacup .

“Please,” Riku said curtly, and without much warmth, Noriko added more tea.

As I was astonished by these two, the sliding door of the guest room opened, and Riku's father, Jin'emon, peeked in, saying, “Riku-kun, you’re here.” Suddenly, Inako felt a tightness in her stomach.

In a calm appearance, dressed in a kimono and haori made of Oshima tsumugi, with a mouth tightly closed and a Kaiser mustache extending sharply on both sides, Jin'emon sat down and glanced at Inako.

“You finally came back; you must be tired from playing a lot,” he said with clear sarcasm.

Jin'emon lit a Golden Bat cigarette and exhaled smoke without looking particularly pleased.

“Mr. Jin'emon, I heard that an important guest is coming soon.”

“If you don’t mind, Riku-kun, please join us. That person is Mizoe from the Sanzo store, the eldest son. It seems he has just been appointed as the manager of the Sanzo store Fushimi branch, and he is here to greet .”

The Sanzo store is a wealthy merchant based in Matsusaka, and has been operating as a sake wholesalersakadonya for a long time. Since the Meiji era, it has followed the examples of Mitsui and Sumitomo, and with its abundant funds, it has also ventured into banking and coal mining.

During the Battle of Toba-Fushimi, when the city of Fushimi suffered significant damage, the Hyakkawa store also experienced some losses and was struggling. At that time, the Fushimi branch of the Sanzo store helped recover sales by wholesaling

Fushimi sake to Tokyo, which was an untapped market, as “ kudari .” Since then, the Sanzo store has become an indispensable presence.

“The previous branch manager was quite old, wasn’t he? Does Yosuke-san have any business experience?”

“There’s no need to worry about that. After all, he is the renowned Dr. Baikal.”

“Dr. Baikal, you say?” Riku’s eyes widened in surprise.

During the Russo-Japanese War, it was well-known that a professor from the Imperial University, who was called “Dr. Baikal” by the public, repeatedly advocated the hardline stance of “Japan should annex the territory east of Lake Baikal in Russia.”

At the same time, a strange figure appeared in Kansai. This person, despite being young, traveled the world, drank all the sake from the countries he visited, and upon returning to Japan, established an import division for foreign liquor in his family’s store, rapidly expanding his business using the connections and sales channels he cultivated abroad.

“Speaking of Dr. Baikal, I’ve heard all sorts of dubious rumors, like ‘he drank two shō of wine in a rural town in Germany in one go,’ or ‘he drank one to of sake in Qing China and composed a hundred poems,’ or ‘he becomes stronger in fights when drunk.’”

Even now, his true nature is not well known, and outrageous rumors precede him. However,

“I have tasted many famous and rare wines, but the only one that stands out is the Baijiu —also known as Baiqianer .”

At one point, it seems that the only certain information is that this person boasted so grandly, and before long, he became known alongside the aforementioned professor as "the Baikal of the East, the Paikal of the West."

That Paikal doctor is said to be the eldest son, Yosuke, who brought immense profits to Mitsuzoe Shoten through foreign liquor.

"Eventually, he will inherit the Mitsuzoe family estate... So, Inako, please be careful not to make any mistakes."

As Jin'emon glared at her, Inako stiffened her face, and through the fusuma the maid called out.

"Sir, Mr. Mitsuzoe has arrived."

"This is our eldest daughter, Noriko, and next to her is our second daughter, Inako."

Once Jin'emon finished the introductions and lifted his face from the tatami, he locked eyes with Mitsuzoe Yosuke, who wore a faint smile.

Sitting cross-legged on the guest room's cushion, Yosuke, whose body was somewhat thin and wrapped in a three-piece suit, had a smile plastered on his face, with his eyes darting around restlessly.

"What lovely daughters you have. I'm almost thirty and still single, so I can't understand the feelings of a parent with children, but it must be delightful to see them grow into such beauties."

"They are still quite inexperienced. Especially the second daughter, I'm struggling with her clumsiness."

"Did you say Inako-chan? How old are you?"

Suddenly addressed by Yosuke, Inako was taken aback and stammered, "I-I'm fifteen."

Yosuke rubbed his chin and looked at Inako with interest. Judging that Inako, who was fidgeting while sitting upright, would soon reveal her nervousness, Jin'emon cleared his throat loudly.

"Let's keep the greetings to this, and it's time to guide you to the storehouse."

The long, two-story sake brewery was built adjacent to the main house, where brewing and storage take place. Since sake is brewed in winter, when it's easier to maintain the suitable temperature for brewing, the brewers have returned to their hometowns to work in agriculture, leaving the brewery quite empty at this time of year.

Jin'emon used his favorite bamboo root whip as a pointer, explaining the brewery to Yosuke. Meanwhile, Riku stood with his arms crossed, watching from a distance, while Noriko, who disliked the smell of the brewery, held a handkerchief to her frowning face.

"It's a splendid brewery. Even as mechanization advances, traditional tools and techniques still remain."

Yosuke said grandly, spreading his arms. I thought that Dr. Paikal, who has enjoyed sake from around the world, must also take pride in his own country's sake, but then Yosuke clicked his shoes together.

"That's why I'm quite worried about whether sake can become a drink suitable for the new century."

Inako couldn't believe her ears at Yosuke's solemn words.

"Japanese sake is supported by the hard work of the brewers, and despite the high risk of failure, most of the work still relies on human intuition. Can this unstable sake, bound by the old concept of tradition, compete with Western liquor?"

"That's a harsh word."

Even when his work was directly criticized, Jin'emon could only smile wryly. In contrast, Inako, whose guts were boiling with anger, shouted at Yosuke, "That's not right!"

"The skills of the toji and kurabito have been passed down and matured over hundreds of years. Without relying on a thermometer, a kurabito can tell the temperature of the water with their fingertips."

Yosuke, with wide eyes, eventually twisted his mouth like a child who had just thought of a mischief.

"But how many years does it take for an individual to master that skill? Even if you say you've perfectly acquired the technique, how do you prove it? I think it's quicker to just stick a thermometer in."

"Well," Inako was at a loss for words.

"Still, everyone does not do a half-hearted job. Sake is a drink of the gods."

After a moment of being dumbfounded, Yosuke burst into laughter that echoed through the spacious kura.

"I give up, I give up. I'll accept my defeat. I can't compete when you bring gods into the argument. …But if the sake is so precious, why does it spoil during brewing? If the quality of the sake is determined by the whims of the gods, then it's pointless to have faith in it."

As he tried to retort, Jin'emon's cane struck Inako's arm.

“Shut up. I told you not to get involved in sake brewing.”

Jin'emon looked at Inako with cold eyes as she groaned in pain from her arm. Inako tried to persist, but was gently grabbed by Riku on the shoulder and reluctantly fell silent.

“What a delightful child,” Yosuke laughed, his gaze lingering on Inako.

That night, Inako and Noriko, changed into their nightgowns, stood on the porch illuminated by the lantern . The two wore yukatas made of white chirimen fabric, with Inako in a blue patterned one featuring butterbur and Noriko in a blue patterned one with iris .

With their hair down, Noriko played a leisurely tune on the shamisen while Inako sat on the porch, swinging her legs and listening to the music. Between the persimmon tree planted in the courtyard and the eaves, the starry sky peeked through, and the smoke from the mosquito coil occasionally tickled Inako's nose as she gazed at the stars.

“I was really nervous when I suddenly confronted Dr. Paikar with a shield .”

Without stopping her playing, Noriko said calmly.

“Because he said something that seemed to mock the kurabito .”

“In those situations, you just let it slide. You don’t take everything to heart.”

“You can say that because you’re skilled, big sister.”

Inako always thought that there were too many things she couldn't do compared to her older sister.

With her upright character and both talent and beauty, Noriko handles everything effortlessly. The number of shamisen songs she has learned is countless, and when she brews tea, it makes the guests go "Hmm." When she does sewing, she can make kimonos suitable for a wedding.

In contrast, Inako is clumsy and unskilled in everything she does. The number of shamisen strings she has cut is countless, and when she brews tea, it makes the guests go

"Ugh." When she does sewing, she ends up making a huge teru teru bozu that could be displayed under the eaves.

"Our only strong point is relying on the gods."

"That's not true. Inako has a lot of things that we don't have."

Wondering if it was really true, I looked back, but Noriko was playing the shamisen with a composed face. The body of the shamisen was supported by her right foot, which was in a seiza position, while Inako lay down with her head resting on Noriko's left thigh.

"Inako, you're in the way," Noriko said with a hint of warning, but her hands did not stop playing.

Inako, immersed in a soft feeling, gently combed Noriko's hair that had fallen onto her pajamas with her fingers.

Inako's indigo kasuri kimono, made of the same Oumi jofu as Noriko's white kasuri, has become quite worn due to frequent rubbing and snagging. Therefore, every time she asks to try on Noriko's white kasuri, she is rebuffed with, "If I lend it to you, it will come back as a rag."

With her good looks and elegant long hair like a wet crow, Noriko is an object of admiration for Inako. Inako secretly rejoiced that her hair, which she had been growing out in hopes of matching Noriko's length, was finally getting close.

"Hey, big sister. When will you make up with Riku?"

“What’s this, a bush ?”

“I’m trying to make sure the two of them meet as much as possible, but it’s just fighting all the time.”

“Don’t worry about unnecessary things, think about your future. You’re already at the age where you can get married.”

Inako’s heart skipped a beat. That’s right, she was at an age where it wouldn’t be strange to get marriedyome. She wondered what kind of man her future husband would be, but it was questionable whether there was even someone willing to marry her.

“If I’m going to get married, I want someone like Riku-san. Strong and reliable.”

“Is that so? I can give you someone like that anytime.”

Rikiko said this without a hint of jealousy , her mouth twisting slightly in a mischievous way.

“Right. What if the partner is Dr. Paikaru?”

“I absolutely can’t stand that. His sideburns look like centipede antennae, and it gives me the creeps just looking at them.”

“Me too,” Rikiko said with a faint smile , and we both chuckled together.

It has been a week. The sunlight is strong from the morning, and I am feeling the heat of the boiling water in a hellish humidity that is exhausting me. Just then, Yosuke came again. It seems he has something important to discuss, as he is talking with Jin'emon in the guest room for a long time.

Since the woman seemed busy, Inako took the cooling device to the guest room instead. Carefully supporting the cooling device with both hands, she stopped in front of the guest room when she heard a conversation through the fusuma .

“──Therefore, I believe that the secret sake created by Mr. Hyakukawa in the past is truly a sake worthy of the 20th century. How about trying to make it again?”

Secret sake? Inako couldn't help but eavesdrop, wondering what it was about.

“I don’t know what you heard from the previous branch manager, but that is certainly not a thing that can meet Mr. Mitsuzoe’s expectations.”

“As you know, we are currently in a post-war recession, and I’m sorry to say that Mr. Hyakukawa’s sake sales are not good . We need to create a sake that will awaken the public’s interest soon.”

In response to the silent Jin'emon, Yosuke snorted.

“If that can’t be done... how about taking this opportunity to switch to a beer factory?”

The cooling device slipped from her weakened hands.

By the time she exclaimed “Oh,” it was too late, and the cooling device fell to the floor with a loud noise.

“What’s that?” Jin'emon, peeking out from the guest room, spotted Inako and glared at her upon seeing the disastrous scene.

“Ah, um, it’s hot, so I brought the cooler.”

Jin'emon pushed Inako aside and picked up the cooler lying on the floor. He reattached the detached fan and wound the spring. Inako prayed for its safety, but all that came from the machine was a sound as if the gears were not meshing, and the fan showed no signs of moving, causing her stomach to tighten.

“Is this how it is! Can’t you even carry things properly, you fool!”

As Jin'emon's thunderous voice made him shrink both physically and mentally, the carefree Yosuke came along.

“Haha, it’s true that you’re clumsy.”

“I apologize. I’ve made a terrible spectacle of myself.”

While Jin'emon bowed his head, Inako cautiously opened her mouth, “Um, um...”

“Is what you said earlier about the beer factory true?”

Yosuke looked momentarily puzzled, then laughed heartily.

“Of course it was a joke. Did you take it seriously? You’re so naive.”

Just kidding. Dazed for a moment, a bundle came to mind when Jin'emon's angry voice reminded Inako of the current problem: "Don't meddle in family matters! More importantly, what are you going to do about this situation?" Inako shrank back again.

“Y-yes. I know someone who can fix that.”

Inako ran off as if escaping, and brought back a Hōrai sign from her room.

Jin'emon received the sign but looked at it with suspicion, saying, “A temple goods store repairing machines?”

“I wondered why too, but the person who gave me that sign seemed to know a lot about machines.”

“That sounds suspicious . There’s a phone number, but there’s no way to verify it.”

“Then let me look it up for you,” Yōsuke said, pulling out a thick phone book for Kyoto from his bag.

“I carry it around for work, so it’s perfect timing.”

While Yōsuke was checking the number on the sign, Inako anxiously watched the situation, but when Yōsuke finally looked up and smiled, saying, “Found it,” Inako felt a sense of relief.

“However, it’s the number for a different store called ‘ Rokkaku Kimono Store.’”

Inako froze, still wearing a bright expression as she listened to Yōsuke’s next words.

Shin'emon let out a deep sigh, as if he had squeezed it out from his entire body.

“To make a blunder in front of the customer, and in the end, to be deceived by someone whose true nature is unknown to me... how much more will you tarnish the name of Hyakukawa before you are satisfied?”

“Father, listen, I didn’t mean it like that——”

Jin'emon swung the stick he was holding down onto Inako's head. A sharp pain shot through, and Inako's eyes blurred with tears running . Yosuke chuckled softly and said, "Well, well, Mr. Hyakukawa," trying to calm .

"Inako-chan is a straightforward child. She even says that sake is a drink of the gods."

“No, I’m just dull-witted. …Let’s go back to the room; I’m sorry for interrupting the conversation.”

Shin'emon entered the guest room with a rough breath.

When Yōsuke tried to return the card, saying, "That was a disaster," he noticed the writing on the back.

“What is this?” Yosuke said, and as he glanced at the back, the smile quickly vanished from his face.

“Electrical Catalog……”

It was a voice filled with disbelief. Noticing Inako's gaze, Yosuke returned the card and said, "Well then," with a smile as he entered the guest room. In the now quiet hallway,

Inako traced the phone number on the card with a downcast look, her eyes drawn to the address written next to the number.

The address is Shinkyogoku. In the eyes of Inako, who gazes at the tag, there is a subtle power.

That afternoon. Inako, carrying a ryofuu cool breeze wrapped in a furoshiki, was heading north on the Kawaramachi street by train.

It has been since my childhood visit to the Great Buddha of Hōkō-ji that I have come to this area. As I looked out the window, I was suddenly surprised by the appearance of a pointed-roofed brick building mansion. A nearby lady said that it was the newly built St. John's Church, and with its strikingly clean and magnificent appearance, Inako couldn't help but put her hands together in prayer.

Advancing along the tree-lined Kiyamachi street with lush green willows by the Takase River, I got off the train at the Shijo Kobashi stop, proceeded west along the narrow Shijo street that runs east-west through the city, and arrived at Shinkyogoku street.

Shinkyogoku street, established in the early Meiji period, is the most bustling area in Kyoto. Various people, including shopkeepers from hat shops and geta shops, as well as housewives with maids, elderly men with tea bottle heads, and students, were coming and going along the street, and under the harsh summer sun, most people were busily fanning their faces with fans and uchiwa .

Every tea shop had a signboard reading "Ice Shop." Workers enjoyed ice sprinkled with sugar and lemonade on the veranda of the shop, while Inako, glancing at the Komachi red koma-chikurenai shop where girls in hakama trousers were raising cheerful voices, arrived near the address on the tag but couldn't find a shop that seemed to fit.

"It should be around here."

While wandering around, I accidentally bumped into a passing boy. In the process, he tumbled and spilled a large number of sticks that were in the basket he was carrying onto the ground.

" I'm sorry ; I was careless."

"No, no, don't worry about it. I'm just overwhelmed to have bumped into such a beautiful person."

The boy, wearing a kimono with the hem tucked up and a happi coat that had "Yagura Takenemuchi Craft Store" written on the collar, stood up while joking lightly, and laughed brightly with a face covered in dirt.

As Inako handed him the stick she picked up, she thought he looked like a smaller version of Kihachi, and the boy's eyes caught on the tag that read "Oh."

"Hey, are you looking for the Horai Buddhist Goods Store?"

"Huh? Y-yeah, but I'm a bit lost."

"Then I'll guide you. I was just about to stop by there."

The boy started walking without waiting for Inako's response. Inako hesitated about what to do, but since she had no other options, she decided to follow his small back.

"Do you know Mr. Sakamoto?"

"I'm Yajiro. Do you have business with Kihachi?"

"Yeah. I want him to fix my cooling device."

"Repairing machines, huh? He'll be happy about that. Look, it's right over there."

The Penglai Buddhist Supplies Store was located down a small alley. Upon passing through the entrance with a large sign hanging, the dimly lit interior displayed candles, incense, and various Buddhist supplies such as prayer beads.

Yajirō called into the back of the shop, "Excuse me, it's Yagura!"

"Big brother, I've brought a customer. Um…"

Glancing briefly at the boy, she gave her name: "Momokawa Inako."

"Momokawa… Kinako, was it?"

When Inako corrected him, "It's Inako!" someone at the back of the earthen floor burst out laughing.

"What's going on, Yajirō? Just finished a sale?"

Still looking pleased with himself, Kihachi came out laughing, his face brimming with a smile.

"I went to show a customer some product samples. Then on the way back, I ran into Inako."

After exchanging a few words with Kihachi, Yajirō perked up and said, "Well then, see you at the next night school." With that, he left. Watching him go, Kihachi kept smiling as he turned his eyes back to Inako.

"Sorry to keep you waiting—um, Inako."

As soon as he kicked him in the shin, Kihachi let out a groan.

“What are you doing all of a sudden?” protested Kihachi, to which Inako bared her teeth in anger .

“How dare you give me a nonsense number? Thanks to you, I've gotten into a real mess.”

“Nonsense?” Kihachi tilted his head in confusion , when suddenly a loud phone rang from the neighboring house.

Eventually, someone answered, and the bell stopped ringing. After a brief silence,

“Is Bunshichi here?” a suddenly angry old man with white hair shouted as he barged into the store.

“Huh?” came a sleepy voice from the back of the store, and a middle-aged man wearing a happi with glasses came out, scratching his messy hair . This man, shedding flakes from his head, was probably Bunshichi.

“Ah, kimono shop, how are you?”

“How am I? That's not the point. Another phone call for me has come to my house!”

“I’m really sorry about that. So, what did the other party say?”

"I cut it off right away! Hurry up and erase the phone number on the call card."

While watching the exchange between the kimono shop and Bunshichi, Kihachi asked, "What does that mean?"

"When I write down the phone number, the customer's trust level is completely different. However, we don't have the money to pay the annual contract fee, so my uncle uncle has

taken the liberty of borrowing the number from the neighboring Rokkaku Rokakku kimono shop."

While Kihachi was astonished, Bunshichi showed no signs of remorse as he calmed the kimono shop.

"Don't worry. I will properly pay for the borrowed labor."

"Then you should also pay for the inconvenience. I keep getting calls meant for you."

While watching the two of them, Inako whispered to Kihachi.

"That kimono shop has some guts to answer the phone so many times. I'm scared of the phone."

"What, are you nervous talking to the exchange operator?"

"What if the other person has cholera? I heard it can be transmitted over the phone."

"That can't be true."

As Kihachi placed his hand on his temple, he said, "What are you, a person from decades ago?" and Bunshichi, still not calming down, took the kimono shop owner and retreated into the back, saying, "Come on, come on, it's in front of the customers."

"Is it really okay to leave it like that?"

"It's fine. That kimono shop owner is also chatty, and he came to make small talk after a wrong number call."

As I worried whether that was true, my eyes met Kihachi's, who was crossing his arms.

Kihachi quickly averted his gaze and said, "...Well, I'm sorry."

"I didn't properly explain the phone number when I handed over the ticket."

"It's fine now. I came all the way here and confirmed that the shop really exists."

"You believed and came all the way here?"

"Believing is my strong point. Besides, I really wanted to get this fixed."

When I took out the ryōfū cooler from the furoshiki, Kihachi leaned in closely and said, "A ryōfū cooler, huh?"

“If you drop it, it won't move anymore. Also, this is a prepayment.”

“Oh, biscuits. And they look like good ones.”

I borrowed a little from the guest snacks on the shelf. Kihachi, who received the package from Inako, quickly took one out and began to nibble on it with his front teeth.

“Maybe I can fix it right away, so could you wait a bit?”

Nodding his head, Inako suddenly flinched as a sharp bell rang.

Looking at the wall clock, it was already three o'clock. Kihito placed the cooler on the workbench in the corner and immediately began to disassemble it. On the workbench were various types of clocks and machines and parts whose purposes were unclear.

As I gazed at the items that clearly stood apart from the other Buddhist implements, Kihachi exclaimed, “It’s done!”

“Huh, it’s already fixed?”

“A machine that doesn’t use electricity is a piece of cake. It was just a gear that had come loose.”

In front of Inako, who was astonished by the quick work Kihachi had done, he wound the spring, and the cooler began to move the fan cheerfully, sending the long-awaited warm breeze.

“Wow, thank you,” Inako said, placing her hand on her chest, but Kihachi crossed his arms with a dissatisfied look.

“Even if it’s fixed, I can’t honestly be happy with this lukewarm breeze.”

As Inako was wrapping the cooler in a furoshiki, the same sharp bell rang again.

“Just right. Look, the tea is ready.”

Kihachi pointed to the machine placed on the workbench. When Inako looked at the workbench, wondering what it was about, she was speechless as she saw a kettle, supported by the machine, pouring hot water into a teapot by itself pouring .

“Surprised, aren’t you? I tried to assemble an automatic tea maker imitating the British model. It’s linked to the alarm clock I installed, and when the time comes, the alcohol lamp for boiling water is lit, and then, just like a mechanical doll, it pours the boiled water into the teapot with the tea leaves.”

Kihachi poured the tea from the teapot into a cup for Inako and handed it to her. The taste didn’t compare to Yoshiko’s tea, but it was surprisingly not bad. As a tea snack, Kihachi added a biscuit.

“This is a Buddhist goods store, right?”

“That’s the main business. I can handle simple machine repairs, so I take repair orders, and if I get the material costs, I can make things according to requests.”

“Could it be that this tea alarm clock is for sale too?”

As Kihachi nodded while munching on the biscuit nodding , Inako made a sour face .

“Don’t make that face. You should try moving everything before delivery.”

While feeling exasperated, Inako's gaze wandered over the machinery on the workbench.

“Are there any other alarm clocks? If there's one that makes it hard to oversleep, I might buy ”

“There are various kinds. I even have a prototype that I modified a bit, and it will definitely wake you up.”

Upon hearing about the prototype, Inako remembered and showed the ticket she had brought to Kihachi.

“This ticket has 'Electric Catalog' written on the back, but was it an important piece of paper?”

Kihachi, who had been delighted until then, slightly his expression.

“...Oh no, I might have mistakenly handed over the ticket I was using as a ledger.”

“If it’s about how to make some product, should I return it?”

“You don’t have to return it. I was just designing a prophecy machine I thought of a long time ago to kill time.”

“Prophecy?”

“I wrote down twenty things that electricity will likely achieve in the next hundred years in a book called 'Electricity Catalog'.”

Watching Kihachi shyly blush, a little mischievous spirit welled up inside me.

“You have other predictions, right? Let me see that book for a bit.”

It's embarrassing for anyone to have their childhood doodles seen.

“...That's an old story. I lost it a long time ago.”

Seeing Kihachi's wry smile, Inako sighed, “I see,” while sipping the now cold tea noisily .

“It's a shame that there's no more material to tease you with.”

“I-I wasn't thinking that at all.”

Feeling caught off guard, I nibbled on a biscuit while chatting about trivial things when a burst of laughter came from the back of the shop. Just as Kihachi said, the angered kimono shop owner seemed to be engaged in small talk with Bunshichi. Glancing at the wall clock, I realized quite a bit of time had passed.

“It's already this late. I should head home.”

Since Kihachi said he would take me to the nearby Kyoden stop, the two of them left the shop together. Walking through the new Kyogoku dyed in the sunset, they proceeded down Taratara-zaka and turned right onto Sanjo Street, famous for its brick buildings like the post office.

The setting sun shines on Yabe Toku as Inako glances at the clock tower of the clock shop with a glance . Inako decided to ask Kihachi a question.

“Mr. Sakamoto, are you going to work in the machinery field in the future?”

“More than machinery, it’s electricity. I want to go to university, study, and get into a lighting company or a company that makes electrical products. If possible, I’d like to work for a company that has a 'Japanese Edison.'”

The person referred to as the Japanese Edison, who manufactures scientific instruments in Nijō, is said to be very insightful. When he was the same age as Kihachi, he

apparently managed to create a Western dynamo just by looking at an illustration.

Later, he succeeded in domesticating storage batteries, and the produced batteries were used in the navy's new wireless devices, greatly contributing to the victory of the Combined Fleet over the Russian Baltic Fleet in the Battle of Tsushima.

“I heard that they are currently developing medical X-ray devices at that factory.”

As Inako walked while half-listening to Kihachi's complicated talk, she saw the St. Xavier Cathedral with round stained glass in front of her, and instinctively put her hands together in front of the pure white church.

Perhaps interrupted by the conversation, Kihachi pouted his lips in dissatisfaction.

“Hey, do you believe in Christianity?”

“Not really. But I’ve heard that Jesus is a great god. I heard from a person named Riku that he healed the sick and even resurrected after death. I don’t pray for benefits or anything.”

“It really is a suspicious story, isn’t it? I wonder why Westerners in civilized countries believe such tall tales?”

“Mr. Sakamoto, you were born in a temple, right? How can you say such disrespectful things about people's faith?”

“Precisely because I was born in a temple. I've seen the monks, chanting incomprehensible sutras and charging money for things like Dharma names , which are of no benefit. Scaring believers with hell and punishment to profit is what religion is about.”

Looking up at the church, Kihachi's eyes had taken on the resentful look he had shown before the mound.

“But the era of blind faith in gods and Buddhas is over. Just as X-rays made the invisible visible, electricity will increasingly reveal the true nature of miracles and curses.”

To expose the gods. That single phrase made Inako feel an unpleasant throb inside her.

“Instead of gods who do nothing, electricity will move machines and enrich people and the world.”

Kihachi looked up at the sky and declared loudly with a confident face.

“The twentieth century is the century of electricity.”

“...There’s no way electricity can replace gods.”

Kiha looked taken aback, as if he hadn't expected to have his conversation interrupted.

“God exists. My mother said that there are invisible gods in alcohol who help . If you cut corners, the gods will ruin the alcohol, but if you respect and honor and make it with care, the god in the alcohol will lend a hand and make it delicious. No matter how much electricity you have, it can’t replace the gods—”

“How ridiculous.”

Inako's assertion was interrupted Kihachi's cold remark.

“Now, with electric microscopes, we can see small things. If we use that, we can understand the true nature of these gods. The twentieth century is an era where craftsmanship, intuition, and tradition, which are inefficient, are replaced by electricity in sake brewing. We can make delicious sake without praying to any gods.”

The face of Yosuke, who mocked the work in the brewery, floated in Inako's mind, and her irritation rapidly increased.

“Saying ‘sake made with the power of gods’ sounds so suspicious like a con artist sales pitch.”

And provocatively, Kihachi laughed through his nose.

“Inako's mother is probably a con artist.”

Her head, boiling with irritation like water coming to a boil, finally reached its limit.

“Whether they exist or not, it’s electricity that matters!”

“...What did you say?”

“What century of electricity are you talking about? The phonograph and clocks are all powered by springs, and there were no electric lights on in the shops. How many people in this era rely on electricity to live? A lamp provides enough light, and trains are faster than electric trains. If you have gas, you can boil water. Whether electricity exists or not makes no difference.”

In response to Kihachi, who seemed at a loss for words, Inako let out a laugh through her nose.

“The sight of Mr. Sakamoto, who is infatuated with electricity, is ridiculous . He says similar things to the monks he dislikes. He clings desperately to the power of electricity, which is unnecessary.”

As time passed, deep wrinkles formed between Kihachi's brows, and his clenched fist began to tremble slightly.

“The electricity catalog is just a prophecy written by a fraud, right?”

Chime, chime, a silly bell rang. Before he knew it, they had arrived at the Kyoto Electric stop.

“That's enough, go home.”

In a low voice, Kihachi quietly said. Without looking back at Kihachi, Inako jumped onto the moving train.

Once seated, Inako slumped down and pressed her forehead weakly against the cool breeze device.

Unpleasant things tend to continue. When I returned to Fushimi, I ended up having dinner with Yosuke, who was still at home.

At the table where the dishes are laid out, Yosuke is reaching for the mackerel sushi without looking particularly appetizing. When Jin'emon pours him some sake and asks, "How does it taste?" he replies with a neutral, "It's exquisite."

"Do you have a favorite fish, Mr. Yosuke?"

In response to Jin'emon's question, Yosuke, with a face flushed from the sake, paused to think for a moment.

"It's sanma."

"I see, indeed, the fatty autumn sanma is delicious."

"No, what I like is the sanma caught just before its peak season. I've had sashimi from sanma during that time, and it's something special. It has a refined sweetness, and above

all—"

His eyes suddenly turned to Inako, who became frozen as if paralyzed.

"The texture of the firm flesh that you don't find in fully ripe sanma is irresistible."

Inako hurriedly averted her gaze, feeling as if thousands of centipedes were crawling all over her body crawled on.

I really can't stand this Dr. Paikal. Ever since dinner started, time has felt agonizingly slow, and there's a tightness in my chest that makes me feel uneasy.

Penglai The time spent drinking tea at the Buddhist supplies store was fleeting.

Inako, recalling Kihachi's face as he laughed through his nose, set down her chopsticks to dispel her current sentiment, bowed to those around her, and left the room. She wandered aimlessly through the house and ended up in the kitchen.

The maids were out, and the pot for warming sake on the stove was boiling. Seeing this, Inako rolled up her sleeves and gently dipped her index finger into the boiling water.

The temperature was just right to barely write the character "の" with her fingertip on the surface of the pot.

This was the sterilization temperature for sake that her mother had taught her— the temperature for heating. If the temperature is too high, the flavor of the sake is ruined, and if it's too low, bacteria will multiply and spoil the sake.

Feeling it was lukewarm, Inako added a few more pieces of firewood to strengthen the flame.

"Isn't that kind of place unsettling?"

Yosuke peered over her shoulder into the pot and Inako flinched. When she turned around and stepped back, Yosuke, whose neck was flushed red from the sake, hiccupped.

"Was that practice for heating? Why is Inako-chan doing something like that?"

"Sometimes, I practice when I want to clear my mind. It helps me feel calm."

"As always, a child who doesn't make any sense," Yosuke laughed in a way that seemed to despise .

“But you know, from now on, there’s no need to do such things anymore.”

In a sudden move, Yosuke leaned in closer, pushing Inako's back against the wall.

Feeling the heat on her back, Inako asked with a stiff expression, “What are you talking about?”

Yosuke's mouth, now close enough to smell the strong scent of alcohol, twisted into a grin.

“Because you are going to be my wife.”

A dry sound of splitting wood echoed.

She didn’t understand what he had just said. Was it a misunderstanding?

“Um, aren’t you a bit too drunk? I can bring you some water.”

“I’m being serious. I like you. I definitely want you to come and be Sanzo’s wife.”

Yosuke's hand rested on Inako's shoulder, and it felt as if he was squeezing the slight bit of hope that remained into .

My whole body felt drained of blood, and I fell into a sickening state where my feet didn't seem to touch the ground.

My head was spinning, and even if I wanted to make a sound, no words would come out.

"If you come to be my wife, you won't need to indulge in silly distractions anymore. You'll have jewels, fine kimonos, beefsteaks, and cakes. A life of paradise so luxurious that you won't have the time to worry."

Paradise, Inako's mouth moved silently, but she shook her head vigorously as if to deny it.

"I appreciate the offer, but I really can't imagine someone like Dr. Paikar being my wife."

"Even so, I need you to take on that role. I made an arrangement with Hyakukawa-san."

Inako found herself unable to think at all. Her mind felt as full of holes as a lotus root.

"Mitsuzoe's shop has done everything possible for Hyakukawa-san, and at times, we've even lent funds from our bank. However, Hyakukawa-san says he doesn't want to make new sake in response to our requests. That doesn't make sense... but I'm not a demon. So I jokingly proposed this."

Yosuke raised his index finger sharply.

"If I could have Inako-san as my wife, I would ensure that you could continue making sake as you are now."

“...Did you threaten your father by saying that?”

“As expected, she’s a daughter who has grown up without knowing any hardships, relying on others. Think about it. If a clumsy daughter gets a suitor, the store will be protected. Isn’t that a win-win for Mr. Hyakukawa?”

“Isn’t there any will from our side?”

“Will?” Yosuke laughed derisively through his nose.

“Do you have the right to complain about luxury when you’re worth nothing more than becoming my wife?”

Yosuke’s smile turned into something vile as he saw the sharp pain in Inako’s heart.

“Well, if you were to refuse this marriage... then the joke from this morning might just become reality.”

──Instead of the unpleasant sales of sake, they would switch to a beer factory.

A burning anger surged up, and Inako glared at Yosuke fiercely .

“If you think I’m a worthless person, then why did you choose me?”

Suddenly, Yosuke’s palm covered Inako’s right cheek with a sticky touch, freezing her entire body.

“That timid attitude tickles a man's heart. Simple and unadorned, above all—”

Just as Inako was about to scream at the creepy feeling of the centipede crawling , the maid rushed in with a pale face, shouting, “Miss, get away!”

Though I was happy that help had come for moment, the maid pushed Inako aside and yelled, “Fire!”

As Inako, who had fallen, got up, the firewood that had missed its target was blazing in front of the kitchen.

“What’s all the commotion!”

When Jinnemon arrived and grasped the situation, he instructed the maid, “Use the water from the water jar.”

Then, looking down at Inako, who was rolling on the ground, his eyes widened in shock.

Jinnemon descended to the ground, and to his surprise, he approached with a knife that had been in the sink.

—I’m going to be killed. The moment I became aware of that, my legs lost strength, and I began to back away on the ground while sitting. However, Jinnemon easily caught up and roughly grabbed Inako's single-braided hair.

“ I’m sorry ”

The tip of the raised knife glimmers dully.

At the moment I strongly closed my eyes, it was my hair that let out a scream.

For some reason, my head felt strangely light. As I opened my eyelids with trembling hands, I saw the severed locks of hair hanging from Jin'emon's hand like the neck of a dead bird, looking down at Inako.

Unconsciously, my hand that had gone behind my back cut through the empty air. There was no hair.

The hair that was almost the same length as my sister's had been cut around my neck.

"Why... why..."

Looking up with eyes blurred by tears, Jin'emon returned a cold gaze to Inako.

"...This should make you reflect a little. You always do incomprehensible things."

"I-I was just trying to practice lighting a fire in an empty pot for a change."

"I have no idea what you're talking about..."

Jin'emon placed his hand on his forehead and twisted his mouth as if he were crushed.

"Please, can you start acting properly soon?"

It was exactly what Inako had been wishing for. The face of Jinnemon, filled with suffering, pierced deeper into Inako's heart than any angry voice. Behind him, Yosuke was covering his mouth and laughing.

"Don't worry about it; your hair can grow as much as you want in the future."

“I apologize for showing you something unpleasant. If I have offended you, I sincerely apologize for that.”

"There is no change in my feelings, so please rest assured. Well then, I will return first."

As Inako weakly opened her mouth while gazing at Yosuke's back, who was cheerfully walking away, her eyes were vacant.

“Is it true that Yosuke is going to marry us...?”

“It seems that they have liked it since the time they met at . They want to register immediately in line with their appointment as branch manager.”

“What do you mean...?”

“Next week, there will be a celebration for Mr. Yosuke's appointment as branch manager, but it seems that it will suddenly be turned into a wedding ceremony with you. Since there's no way to prepare the dowry in time, it will just be a simple registration for now.”

Jin'emon looks down at the still sitting grasshopper on the dirt floor with a puzzled expression.

“What’s with that face? You’re not dissatisfied with your marriage, are you?”

“Am I just a tool for business?”

“...What did you say?”

“Is my big moment just going to be brushed aside as ‘for now’?”

“Shut up!” Jinyuemon shouted.

“You can’t improve in either practice or housework. You sully the family name, yet you can’t even listen to your parents properly.”

Faced with the relentless verbal abuse, tears welled up in Inako’s eyes as she said, “No, that’s not it.”

“That fire earlier, it was Yosuke-san who—”

“Blaming others, are we? Clumsy people are always good at making excuses.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Inako noticed the maid, who must have witnessed the scene, casting a look of disdain at her.

“ Moxibustion is what I’ve been told, come here.”

Being forcibly pulled by Jin'emon, I was led down the hallway to the front of the storehouse . I was shoved into the dark storehouse. Dust swirled, and I couldn't help but cough.

“You are a cool breeze and a woman,” Jin'emon declared in a stern voice.

“Just a burden, useless.”

The heavy door was closed, and darkness enveloped the inside of the storehouse.

Perhaps Jin'emon thinks that, like most children, I am afraid of the inside of the storehouse . However, for me, this is a world as comforting as being under a blanket. As long as I am in the storehouse, I won’t be scolded any further, I won’t trouble anyone, and I won’t be embarrassed.

Just a burden, useless. It was a painful truth I understood all too well.

Why do I keep failing like this? Why am I so misunderstood by others?

In the first place, if there is a paradise after death, why do I need to remain in this hellish world? The past blunders, Jin'emon's angry voice, the maid's exasperated gaze, and Yōsuke's creepy smile swirled in my head, and eventually, I became too tired to think.

I’m tired of trying hard.

“I want to die”

The words that came out weakly were undoubtedly Inako's true feelings.

*

Kihachi, carrying his luggage, had arrived in front of Hyakukawa Sake Brewery, basking in the hot midday sun.

The burnt brown wooden fence stretched out grandly, and in front of it, a boy who seemed to be a young apprentice had been wandering around. Observing this scene from the side, Kihachi passed through the gate and stood at the entrance.

"Excuse me, this is the Horai Buddhist Goods Store."

From inside came a response of "Yes," and Kihachi's eyes widened when the person who opened the door appeared.

Though she looked like an adult version of Inako, he quickly realized that she was someone else. Taller than Inako, with a fuller figure and slightly narrower eyes. Could she be Inako's sister, Noriko, whom Inako had mentioned?

Surprised by the unfamiliar man, Noriko's eyes seemed to tremble with agitation.

"Um, I have a delivery for Inako-san, and I came to bring it."

"...What is your name?"

In a thin voice that I usually don't hear, I said, "Well, this is Kiyohachi Sakamoto," and my voice rose .

Noriko stared at Kiyohachi as if evaluating him, then opened the half-closed door wide.

"Please come in."

As I was guided down the hallway, a mysterious sweet scent drifted from Noriko, who was walking ahead, making Kiyohachi shiver. Noriko's long hair and the red ribbon holding it up swayed innocently.

Eventually, when we sat across from each other at the table in the guest room, Noriko smiled faintly.

"My name is Noriko Hyakukawa. My younger sister Inako has always been in your care."

"It's not that much of a care," I said, humble , while Kiyohachi's eyes were drawn to the plate of biscuits placed at the edge of the table. Noriko, who let out a small laugh, said, "You can eat them," and pushed the plate in front of Kiyohachi.

"Thank you," I said, and without hesitation, took a bite of a biscuit.

"So, did you come to see Inako today?"

Kiyohachi, who choked on the biscuit, hurriedly shook his head and began to line up the watch he took out from his bag on the table.

“Inago—Inako said she wanted an alarm clock, so I just brought a sample.”

“Hmm,” Nori narrowed her eyes and poked one of the clocks with her finger.

“So, where is Inako?”

“In the storehouse. That girl got herself locked up again last night. It’s a shame you came all this way for nothing. Should I hold onto the clock for a while?”

“No, that’s...” Kihachi hesitated, and Nori covered her mouth and laughed.

“I knew it. You really came here because you wanted to say something to Inako, didn’t you?”

She had a smile that seemed to see right through everything.

“Did you hear about the fight from yesterday from Inako?”

“Fight? I haven’t heard about that. Oh, so you came to make up?”

Kihachi instinctively tried to deny it, but thinking he would just be teased again, he remained silent.

“But it seems difficult to let them meet. I think that girl will be locked up in the storehouse until she gets married.”

“...marriage?”

It was unexpected. Kihachi was informed by Noriko about Dr. Paikar and Inako's marriage.

During the conversation, his body felt a bit restless, and he strangely did not feel the summer heat. The cool breeze device, which had just been repaired in the corner of the room, was running, but was it really this cool?

When the conversation ended, Kihachi spoke from his completely dry throat.

“Is the apprentice outside also watching to prevent Inako from escaping?”

“Yes. Look, there’s one in the garden too.”

Peeking through the slightly opened shoji, he saw a maid looking around bored in front of the storehouse that was secured with a bolt.

“What will you do? Will you come again?”

Kihachi fell silent for a moment, then tidied up the alarm clock on the desk and stood up smoothly.

“Well, it seems to be quite complicated, so I will take my leave now.”

*

When Inako recalls her mother Naeko , it is usually accompanied by the scent of sake reviving .

The most vivid memory is of Naeko, who wrapped a hand towel around her head in a bun, wearing a simple cotton kasuri kimono, giving instructions to the kurabito.

Naeko was a female toji, which would be quite rare in other sake breweries.

A toji is the head of a sake brewery, possessing deep knowledge and intuition about sake brewing, and their role encompasses various responsibilities, including the coordination and leadership of the kurabito. Naeko's father, who was a toji, recognized

her extraordinary intuition when her grandfather retired and made the unusual decision to promote her as a female toji.

For Inako, who was at an age where she craved affection, the sake brewery where Naeko worked was the best place to play.

The kurabito also treated her kindly, allowing her to help with the yamawashi while singing motodori songs, and they showed her various manufacturing processes, teaching her the basics of sake brewing alongside Naeko.

"Inako, you know, there are invisible gods in the sake,"

Naeko would say this as if it were her catchphrase. She believed that if the gods residing in the brewery could inhabit the sake being brewed there, good sake would be produced. If not, it would become sick, referred to as fuzō.

If the gods inhabit the sake but then a bad god enters during the subsequent process, it results in hiotoshi, meaning the sake becomes spoiled. This bad god seems to be weak against heat, making the pasteurization process crucial.

The exact reasons for fuzō and hiotoshi are not clearly understood. All humans can do is pray to the gods to keep the bad gods away.

Therefore, Inako would join Naeko every day in front of the god shelf, praying for the safety of the sake brewing process.

One year, an incident occurred where a large number of rats infested the sake brewery.

While the family and the brewers were in a panic, only Inako calmly caught the rats one after another, and Naoko laughed cheerfully, saying, "Inako is really good at catching rats."

However, due to this commotion, later called the "Hyakkawa Rice Riot," most of the rice used as raw material was discarded, resulting in significant losses. To make up for this, Naoko worked even harder on sake brewing during the winter of the following year, Meiji 33 (1900).

But no matter how much effort Naoko put in, the process called seigiku was something she could not handle.

This process involves putting steamed rice into a room called koji room , but this koji room is forbidden to women .

It is not well known why women are not allowed, but it was a common practice in other sake breweries as well.

"In the koji room, the god of sake resides in the rice. The god of sake is not fond of beautiful women, so if a beautiful woman is present, he gets shy and won't reside in the rice."

Naoko explained the reason for the koji room being forbidden to women, but Inako had a growing desire.

She wanted to see the invisible god just once.

"I'm not as beautiful as my sister, so it should be fine," thought Inako, and one early morning, she waited for a time when no one was around and secretly entered the koji room.

However, the situation in the closed, dark room was unclear, and the figure that resembled a god was nowhere to be seen. In the end, Inako, feeling frightened within less than five minutes, left the koji room as if to escape.

It was something I shouldn't have done, but since I only entered a little, the gods would probably overlook it.

As I held a mix of feelings of relief and anxiety, the new year arrived, and the twentieth century came.

The subsequent preparations and jōsō ended without incident, and just when Inako was finally starting to feel relieved,

“No good, it’s spoiled.”

Naeko, who was inspecting the stored sake, quietly announced.

Seeing the stir among the kurabito made Inako tremble with fear.

── It was because I entered the kōjimuro that I angered the gods.

And the misfortune continued. Right after the sake was ruined, Naeko contracted pneumonia wazurawazu .

Sake brewing is heavy labor that requires constant attention from morning till night. There was also the heavy responsibility of being a tōji . Moreover, Naeko's involvement in sake brewing was not well-received by her shūtome , who often scolded

her, saying, “As a wife, you don’t do anything for the household.” Physically and mentally, Naeko had long reached her limit.

“You don’t have to come to my room every day anymore.”

When I visited the hospital bed, Naoko said while coughing. Deep wrinkles had formed on her cheeks, which had become thin, and her hair, which had been tied back, hung painfully over the futon, lacking luster .

“Don’t worry, I’m praying to God properly, and Mom will surely get better.”

Naoko smiled and said, “Look, I’ll show you something nice,” as she handed a postcard to Inako. In the foreground of the postcard photo, the sea loomed, and in the background was Mount Fuji, covered in snow.

“You’ve always wanted to see Mount Fuji, right? This photo was taken from the Satta Pass in Shimizu.”

Seeing Mount Fuji for the first time in a photo, which she had only known from brocade paintings, made Inako’s heart involuntarily race.

“How high is Mount Fuji?”

“It’s much, much higher than Mount Hiei and Atago Mountain.”

“Is Mount Fuji really this gray?”

“It looks gray because the photo has no color. In reality, it’s a beautiful blue mountain, just like in the brocade paintings. …When I had just gotten married, I went to Tokyo with Jin'emon for some errands, and we stopped by this place. The scenery was so beautiful that I bought this postcard as a souvenir.”

It was unexpected. At home, there was hardly any conversation between the couple, and I only have a vague impression of my mother standing next to the silent Jin'emon with a smile.

“Is Inako still not good with her father?”

“... It's scary when she gets angry, and she's cold to me too.”

“That person is someone who rarely speaks out what they're thinking. The way they are strict with Inako is their way of caring for her, so please forgive .”

The mother’s hand gently stroked head, which had become thin but was warm.

“Mom's illness will get better soon, right?”

“Of course. Inako, you're asking God for it, right?”

Inako pressed her tear-filled eyes against her mother’s chest.

“It was fun going out with Mr. Jin'emon. Is there anywhere you want to go, Inako?”

At Naeko's words, Inako jumped up and said, “Ise Shrine!”

“I’ll ask the most important god to make sure Mom’s illness gets better.”

Then, in a subdued tone, she added, “Also, I need to apologize to God for entering the koji room.”

Inako decided to confess all her mistakes to Naeko, who was unaware of the situation. She thought Naeko would scold her, but surprisingly, after listening to the story, Naeko chuckled.

“It’s because Inako is beautiful that God must have felt embarrassed.”

“But I’m ugly compared to my sister.”

Naeko pinched Inako's cheeks with both hands, confused.

“Smile. Inako’s smiling face is prettier than anyone else’s.”

“Doesn’t Mom get angry? It’s because of me that she can’t drink alcohol.”

“Angry? How could she be? Our proud daughter has been recognized by God as beautiful.”

It’s unclear whether Naeko’s gentle touch was painful because her grip was weak or because of the kind words she received. Tears overflowed from Inako’s eyes, and Naeko wiped the tears that streamed down her cheeks with her fingertips wiped .

“...There’s a place I want to go to even more than Ise,” Inako said in a tearful voice.

“I want to see Mount Fuji. I really want to see if it’s as beautiful and big as in the pictures.”

It's far away, isn't it? As Inako made a smile of resignation and shook her head slowly, Naoko nodded.

“Actually, you can see Mount Fuji even from Kansai.”

“Huh, Mount Fuji?”

“That's right. There's a place not far by train where you can see the real Mount Fuji.”

“Really?” Inako's face lit up, and she leaned forward.

“Then when Mother gets better, take me there.”

“Got it, it's a promise.”

To make a pinky promise, Naoko raised her pinky. Just as Inako was about to extend hers, a maid's voice came from outside, saying, “The doctor has arrived.”

“See, Inako. That's enough for today, go back to your room.”

Feeling a bit lonely as she was led out of the room, Inako looked back at Naoko.

“Inako, you seem to think you have no special qualities, but your smile is really cute. You have a face that brightens people's hearts, like the sun.”

“Mother?”

“Surely your smile will make many people happy.”

The face of my mother, who smiled and said that, disappeared beyond the closed sliding door .

The next day. Naeko, whose condition had suddenly worsened, passed away peacefully.

At the funeral, the stern faces of Jin'emon and Noriko, along with the words of condolence and the monk's sutras, felt like nothing more than a distant event. When the funeral ended, I found myself standing in the sake brewery.

“It's all my fault.”

It was because I entered the forbidden koji room meant for women . I had angered the gods. The sake spoiled, and my mother died; it was all my fault, a punishment from the gods.

The gods truly exist. They are always watching humans. I must never anger them again. I must continue to pray in gratitude, hoping to receive even a little of their blessings.

Inako cried out loud. The sake brewery, usually filled with energy, was strangely quiet, and her cries echoed.

Before I knew it, Inako had fallen asleep, awakened by the humidity of the storehouse .

Inako, who raised her face weakly, looked around with sleepy eyes and saw a fist-sized shadow quickly moving back and forth near the jar among the shelves and chests filled with junk.

As Inako's mind awakened, she took out a handkerchief and cautiously approached, patiently staring at the shadow of the pot. Eventually, she grabbed the mouse that jumped out with her hand through the handkerchief.

“I got five sen.”

The plague has been rampant in Japan since ancient times. Last year, when there were cases in Fushimi Town, a system was implemented to buy rats, the carriers of the pathogen, for five sen each.

Due to being locked in the storehouse multiple times, Inako had a long relationship with rats and knew how to catch them. Last year, she caught a large number to help with the household finances, but because of the sheer number, she was suspected of breeding them and was unable to sell them, becoming the laughingstock of the neighborhood in the end and was hit by Jinyuemon with a stick.

As she pondered whether the buying system was still in place, her stomach growled loudly.

“Ah, I’m so hungry.”

At that moment, a small round light lit up on the floor, and Inako jumped up while still holding the mouse.

The round light wiggled on the floor, expanding and contracting, and when Inako cautiously tapped it with her free hand, the light quickly ran up her arm and her vision became dazzling .

When she opened her eyes slightly, Kihachi, peering in through the lattice window, stood there in astonishment holding a glowing tube.

“Are you... planning to eat that?”

In a tense expression, Kihachi hurriedly released the mouse.

“No way, I don’t eat mice.”

Angry as he approached the barred window, he pointed at the tube and asked, “What’s that thing that’s been shining since earlier?”

“This is a flashlight. In Japanese, it’s called a kaichū dentō .”

When Kihachi fiddled with the knob, the bulb at the end of the tube flickered.

“This time it’s not a spring; it’s genuine electric power.”

At those words, Inako recalled the fightquarrel from yesterday and felt awkward, turning her gaze away from Kihachi.

Perhaps Kihachi was thinking the same thing, as he became distant and said, “Well, um...”

“Yesterday, you were worried about the alarm clock, right? So today, I brought a sample. Then I asked the locust girl for directions and came over the back wall.”

Realizing this, Kihachi gasped, “You... that hair...”

Inako smiled weakly and showed how she combed the shortened ends of her hair with her fingers.

“It’s terrible, isn’t it? With this, I can’t catch up to my sister anymore.”

“It’s before the marriage, right? So why would you do something so important to your hair?”

“I see, you heard about the marriage,” Inako said, talking about yesterday’s blunder, and Kihachi asked seriously, “...So, is Inago going to marry that Dr. Paikar?”

“I’m just a person who can only believe, so I’m not in a position to be selfish. If marrying that person would benefit the family... I...”

As I tried to say more, my lips trembled. I am aware that I am not someone who can be picky. But.

“I... have been trying to grow up quickly in my own way. I’ve held back what I wanted to say, reflected on myself, and let all my complaints be heard by God. ...But no matter what, things just don’t go well.”

Housework and practicetraining have been half-hearted, and after causing trouble, I’ve only disappointed those around me. Perhaps, just by breathing, I’m dragging down the world.

“Really, what is the meaning of my being born?”

Suddenly, Kihachi opened the lid of a flashlighttorch and took out a cylindrical object from inside.

“This is a dry battery. It was first invented by a person named Yai twenty years ago, but it didn’t sell at all at first. In the past, there weren’t as many machines using dry batteries as there are now.”

What is this about? Inako listened to Kihachi's story with a puzzled expression.

"Telephones also used liquid batteries. However, during the First Sino-Japanese War, the liquid batteries froze in the cold of Manchuria, and dry batteries were used instead. That story was published in the newspaper, and for the first time, the world learned about the power of dry batteries."

Kihachi paused and then continued, "It's the same thing."

"There must be a reason for the existence of locusts. The world and even themselves just haven't realized it yet."

Inako looked and bit her lip. If she didn't, everything felt like it would collapse.

Kihachi's words were gentle. But that straightforward kindness struck Inako's heart mercilessly.

"So locusts—"

"What do you know, Sakamoto!"

For a moment, the storehouse was silent, and as if remembering, the cicadas outside began to chirp again.

"I'm, I'm going crazy! I must have some unnamed illness affecting my mind. But since no one knows that, I have to live like everyone else. It would be easier if a doctor told me I had a mental illness... then I could accept it. I could make excuses."

Despite enduring, it didn't work. Large drops of droplets fell dripping from Inako's eyes.

“Believing is our strong point. But I can’t believe in myself.”

“So, are you going to stay here forever? In a place this dark, you won’t find any meaning in living.”

“Then where should I be—”

Having thought that far, she realized there was only one place suitable for her.

Why hadn’t she noticed it until now? Isn’t it a simple matter?

“Then,”

she lifted her tear-stained face and managed a smile with just her lips.

“Will you die with me and take me to paradise?”

Kihachi’s eyes widened. It must have been clear that she was serious.

“There, I’m sure I won’t bother anyone, and I think I can live happily.”

“Is it paradise?”

When Kihachi turned his face away from Inako without saying anything, he simply left. Once he was out of sight, Inako leaned against the wall and sat down weakly. Kihachi must have been astonished at what she would say.

That’s fine. After all, no one would understand my thoughts anyway.

Leaning vaguely against the wall, as I listened to the distant noise of the outside and the cicadas chirping, suddenly the half bell rang out with a tremendous sound that seemed to drown out those voices.

“What, a fire?”

With the urgent sound of the half bell, I could hear the commotion of the family members running around. Just as Inako was about to get up, the door of the storehouse swung open, and Kihachi came in.

“Well then, let’s go.”

Kihachi stood with the light from outside behind him, extending his hand to Inako.

“I’ll take you to paradise now.”

“...Where to?”

“It’s paradise, paradise. You want to see it, don’t you?”

Not understanding what he was saying, Inako opened her mouth in surprise.

“What are you saying——”

“Hey. Let’s go before we get noticed.”

Yahachi pulled my arm and dragged me outside the storehouse without waiting for a reply.

Once outside, I hid beside the storehouse and peeked . The half-bell showed no signs of stopping, and the maid who was watching the porch was running around the house with a pale face.

“I wonder where the fire is happening.”

“Ah, that half-bell is the sound of the alarm clock I made. I set it up under the floor just now.”

“An alarm clock? Isn’t that sound too loud? It’s a nuisance to the neighbors.”

“Well, there’s something in the electrical catalog called ‘Number Eleven Thunder Maker,’ but that works directly with current—”

“That’s scary, so don’t say any more!”

To avoid being seen by the family, I slipped out the back door and peeked onto the main street, just as the fire department arrived and began hurriedly assembling a hand-held in front of the house. Feeling dizzy from the commotion, Yahachi pulled Inako again to leave the scene, but

“Inako-kun!” with a clear voice, Riku appeared from among the onlookers.

Today, he is not wearing the Salvation Army uniform, but rather Western-style clothing with black pants and a shirt. When Riku noticed Kihachi, who was pulling Inako's arm, he instantly showed anger on his face, misunderstanding the situation.

“What are you doing!”

“No good, we have to run!”

The two of them started to run, but Riku quickly closed the distance, charging at them like a locomotive.

Breathless and desperately moving their feet, they couldn't run as they wished due to their geta.

Eventually, Riku was right behind them and reached out for Kihachi just at that moment──.

With a chime, the bell rang, and a train that rushed in from the side made Riku disappear from view.

Before they knew it, the two had crossed the tracks of the Kyoto Electric Railway. Just like scooping goldfish scoop , Riku's feet were caught in the train's rescue net, which sagged under his weight. As Riku's rear scraped against the ground through the net, he shouted, “Ouch, ouch!” while being carried away by the train.

As they anxiously watched, the train finally came to a stop, and Riku crawled from the rescue net.

As people passing by on the street stopped to see what was happening, the two jumped into a nearby rickshaw, and Kihachi told the rickshaw puller, “Anyway, get us away from here. Run faster than the train.”

Did the name of the business rival ignite a fire? The rickshaw puller, filled with enthusiasm, said, "I understand," and set off with the rickshaw.

“Inako-kun, wait!”

The rickshaw's momentum was incredible, and in no time, Riku, holding his rear in agony, was far away.

3

“Well, that’s quite a tear you’ve got there.”

Looking at Riku pants spread out on the tatami in the guest room, Noriko desperately trying to hold back her laughter.

“If you want to laugh, then go ahead and laugh without holding back,” Riku, now in a kimono, said, his cheeks twitching.

“Laughing… heh. I just thought, as usual, you’re running around like a fool.”

“Hey, don’t laugh!”

“You just told me to laugh! By the way, you’ve been standing this whole time; why don’t you sit down?”

“Can I? It feels like my rear is being scraped with a grater.”

Although there was no bleeding, I could feel that the thin skin on my buttocks was peeling off, and I really couldn't bring myself to sit on the floor.

“And with all this noise, I can't even settle my butt down properly.”

After being run over by a train, I arrived at Momokawa Sake Brewery, where the firefighters were packing up the hand-held pump and leaving. At the entrance, Jin'emon was angrily fuming at the maids and apprentices for their mistakes.

“I told Jin'emon, but I saw the boy take Inako with him. Do you know anything?”

“Well, maybe it’s a runaway.”

“Runaway? To me, it looked like a case of looting during a fire.”

“Even if it’s a thief, it’s a Robin Hood type. You’re just too rigid, Riku.”

“So why do you always have to say things with thorns... Never mind, aren’t you worried about your sister?”

“I’m so worried that I can’t even swallow my food,” said Noriko, munching on a biscuit. After finishing, she brushed the crumbs off her fingers and opened the sewing nearby to thread a needle.

“Are you perhaps going to mend ”

“Of course. Even though we are in a reserved state, we are your marriage partner.”

Just as Riku was about to speak, Noriko burst out laughing.

“By the way, you were walking around with that hole in your pants, exposing your rear, weren’t you?”

“Don’t say that!”

Riku's face turned bright red, as if steam were about to rise from it.

*

“Is this paradise?”

Inako squinted her eyes and looked up at the sign of the Hōrai Buddhist goods store, dyed in the evening sun. Reluctantly following Kihachi into the store, she found Bunshichi sitting on a bench, reading a newspaper while smoking tobacco .

“Oh, Inako-chan, welcome—what’s with that hair?”

Bunshichi widened his eyes behind his glasses, and Inako said, “It’s a long story,” while patting her hair .

The store was unusually lively, with four children chatting in one corner. Among them was Yaya and Jirō, who had guided her to the store the other day, and he laughed innocently with a face covered in dirt, saying, “Oh, Kinako big sister!”

“What happened to that strange hair?”

A girl with peach-split hair and bangs poked Yajiro's head and said, "Yajichan, that's rude."

"What are you doing?"

"Yajichan is an idiot, so think a little more before you speak."

In response to the assertive girl's remark, a boy in a striped kimono, who seemed even younger than Yajiro, and a girl with her hair tied back wearing glasses nodded repeatedly in agreement .

"Ito, Mitsu. Sorry, but could you go outside and fix Inako's hair?"

The two girls exchanged a few words with Kihachi and then pulled Inako's sleeve.

"Well then, let's go. Um... Kinako-san? Inago-san?"

"It's Inako, Momokawa Inako!"

While Inako was being pulled outside the shop, Kihachi took the remaining boys and said, "Yajiro and Sadakichi help me with some preparations," and disappeared into the back.

Sitting on a stool, Ito used scissors to tidy up Inako's hair, which was covered with newspaper like a teru teru bozu.

“──Oh, so Inako ran away with Brother Kihachi, huh?”

Itto held down Inako's head, trying to deny it, saying, "Don't move."

"That's not it. When I said, 'Take me to paradise,' I was brought here,"

Itto dropped the scissors in surprise, saying, "What! Were you planning to commit double suicide?"

Inako shouted, "That's not it!" but felt embarrassed as she realized that it could only be interpreted that way. Meanwhile, Mitsu, holding a mirror, had a dreamy expression mixed with sadness, muttering, "Elopement, double suicide," for a while now.

"The fire has been lit again. Mitsu has always liked those kinds of stories,"

"How about you, Itto-chan? You should enjoy a bit of refinement too. I recommend ' Golden '."

"I prefer funny stories. After all, listening to rakugo at the yose is the best."

"Oh dear, Itto-chan, you just don't understand the feelings between men and women, do you?"

As Mitsu teased in a pretentious feminine tone, Itto, feeling pressured, replied, "Well, I'm the kind of woman who is often mocked by Yaji-chan for having no charm," and vigorously cut off her split ends.

"By the way, do you all often visit Sakamoto-san's house?"

In this situation, Inako decided to change the subject, thinking that she might end up cutting her ears off.

“That's right. Brother Kihachi is teaching me for free. We gather at night after finishing our chores at home, so it's night school . It seems that many other families have similar gatherings.”

“But Kihachi's night school often goes off-topic.”

“Yeah. If something comes up, he just keeps talking about electricity.”

Thinking she had learned an unexpected side of him, she couldn't help but burst out laughing at the typical Kihachi story.

Meanwhile, Ito finished the last cut. When she removed the newspaper and looked into the mirror held by Mitsu, the short hair that had been bouncing around was now neatly arranged along the collar of her kimono, tapering down in front.

“My hair looks like a kokeshi doll...”

As Inako sniffled, the two comforted her, saying, “You look cute,” and “It really suits you.” The sun had set during the haircut, and the light from the lamp was spilling out of the shop.

Seeing that lonely light made her feel restless. What kind of commotion would be happening at home in Fushimi right now? What kind of face should she return with after this?

Inako's worries, including her upcoming marriage to Yosuke , seemed endless. Unexpected events kept happening, and she felt as if she had come to a place far removed from reality.

When I looked up at the night sky, the lamps in the store went out and the surroundings became pitch dark.

Before I knew it, Ito and Mitsu were gone, and Inako peered into the dark store.

“Mr. Sakamoto?”

She called out, but there was no response, and she could see the light of a candle deep inside the store. Inako swallowed hard and stepped into the eerie shop, her legs trembling.

The candles were lined up along the narrow dirt floor. Following the light, the candles led from the dirt floor to the side living room, and from the living room to the back stairs chest of drawers .

Inako took off her geta and entered the living room, calling out once more from under the stair chest, “Mr. Sakamoto?”

However, there was still no response, and the second floor was pitch dark, with nothing visible.

Resolutely, Inako climbed the stair chest and arrived at the second-floor room. As expected, there was no light, and she couldn't make out the room's condition. As her body trembled in the strange atmosphere,

“You must be Inako-chan,”

a boy's voice, unfamiliar to her, echoed in the darkness, and Inako screamed.

“Don't be so scared. I heard you want to go to paradise. I think I'll take you there now.”

“W-what does this mean?” Inako asked into the darkness.

“I have called Amitabha . He will come to greet you soon.”

“Did I die without realizing it and end up in paradise?”

As she was completely terrified, the outside of the window suddenly began to shine.

“Let us embark on a journey to the paradise of the ten million billion buddhalands. How cheerful the journey will be!”

What appeared from the light was the golden shining Amitabha .

Surrounding the Nyorai were many Bodhisattvas joyfully swaying their bodies above the clouds. In the scene that resembled the Welcoming picture she had seen before, Inako finally lost her composure.

With a lively music reminiscent of paradise, the Nyorai and others approached.

“ Kannin please. I am not yet prepared in my heart, so I ask for a little more grace .”

Inako desperately repeated, almost screaming, “Manman-chan an, manman-chan an.”

“...I never thought it would be this easy to believe.”

When I heard a voice from behind and turned around with a "Huh," laughter erupted all at once from .

Standing behind was Kihachi, who took off the black cloth he was wearing, and from the closet, Yajiro and Sadakichi, holding a gramophone playing music, came out laughing from the bottom of the stairs, along with Ito and Mitsu.

Inako, unable to grasp the situation, was pointed at by Kihachi, who had sweat beading on his forehead, towards a box nearby.

"This one, this one. It's a device."

On the pedestal was a tin box shaped like a kamaboko. The box had a tube attached, and light extended straight from the lens at the end, projecting a welcome image onto the wide white wall of the neighboring house.

The magic lantern device inserts a magic lantern plate between the lens and the light source, illuminating the picture drawn on the plate to enlarge and project it. Multiple magic lantern plates can be combined, and just like the bodhisattva from earlier, moving the plates by hand can add motion to the images. Once the truth was revealed, Inako felt a wave of relief wash over her.

"Big sister, you were surprised!"

Sadakichi, who hadn't said a word when they first met, smiled shyly. When I pinched his cheeks lightly, realizing that the earlier voice belonged to him, the magic lantern suddenly went out, and the room became pitch dark.

Yajiro quickly struck a match and lit the oil lamp.

"Kihachi, it seems like the pocket flashlight ."

“There should have been plenty of batteries, but I wonder if the brass plate is acting up?”

Kiha tilted his head to and took out a flashlight from the projector while putting in a lamp instead.

At that moment, Bunshichi came in holding a tray with rice balls and pickled vegetables. Watching the children cheer and rush to Bunshichi to stuff their cheeks with rice balls, Inako said to Kiha in a low voice.

“Paradise is about the projector, isn’t it?”

“I showed you paradise, after all. I’m not lying. Are you dissatisfied?”

Inako sighed deeply and tugged at Kiha’s sleeve.

“...Is there more?”

When the paradise picture ended, various projectors were cast on the wall, including foreign landscape photos and a slapstick where a rat jumped into the mouth of a sleeping man. During the play of Yoshitsune , Yajiro and Sadakichi improvised voices, and with a rice ball in hand, Inako greatly enjoyed the world of the projector.

After the projector show, Inako lectured the children on how to catch rats. What started as a thank-you lecture turned out to be unexpectedly popular with the children, and when her lecture ended, Kiha took the opportunity to speak about the predictions in the electric catalog before the excitement in the room cooled down.

“That’s a lie, lemons can’t replace batteries.”

In response to Kihachi's story, Ito laughs and retorts.

“No, it seems that lemon juice can be used as an electrolyte. So I tried making an electric catalog item called ‘Lemon Bomb No. 15.’ It’s a celebratory time bomb that uses a lemon as a battery, and when it explodes, confetti flies everywhere.”

“Where would you even use something like that?”

“Listen to me until the end, Yajiro. Last month, a bookstore opened in Sanjo Fuyachotown. On the first day of opening, as a celebration, I placed the ‘Lemon Bomb’ on top of a stack of books and hid nearby to observe.”

“And did it explode?” Kiyotaka asked, to which Kihachi shook his head lightly, saying, “No, not at all.”

“It didn’t explode, but the staff bit into the lemon... How could they do that to the lemon I bought with my last bit of money...”

As Kihachi sank into despair, the children burst into laughter, and Mitsu said, wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes, “People would prefer a lemon over such a silly bomb.”

“What are you saying? The lemon battery part is removable and can be used as power for other machines—”

As Kihachi continued to talk, the children shouted, “Think of something more useful!”

“Then there’s an item in the catalog called ‘Electric Catfish No. 13.’ It’s a catfish-shaped machine that, when you put plates or pots in its mouth, vibrates the water inside with electricity, cleaning oil and burnt food in just a few seconds.”

Inako, who was watching Kihachi’s passionate explanation from a distance, sighed, “What a strange thing,” while Yajiro sitting next to her squinted and said, “But he’s serious about it.”

“Have you seen Kinako-neechan, the tea maker?”

When Inako nodded yes , Yajiro pointed at Ito, who was giggling.

“Ito's house has a lot of younger siblings running around . To reduce the burden of housework even a little, my brother gathered materials and made a tea maker for Ito.”

Yajiro added that his brother wasn't satisfied because it wasn't electric.

“It was also my brother who suggested that the neighbor, the kimono shop owner, buy a telephone. The shop owner loves to talk, but has bad legs. My brother said, ‘With a phone, you can talk to friends without going far.’”

While listening to Yajiro's story, I absentmindedly watched Kihachi's cheerful profile as he spoke to the children.

“My brother always makes me happy.”

Inako, who had been dozing off, heard uneven snoring in her ears. When she opened her heavy eyelids , she saw the children from the night school lying on top of each other on the tatami.

As she got up, it was still dark outside, and Kihachi was working on something at the desk with a lamp lit. She quietly approached and peeked over his shoulder to seeto see, and Kihachi was flickering a flashlight in his hands.

“Is the flashlight fixed?”

Perhaps because I suddenly called out, Kihachi jumped and trembled his shoulders, saying, "Were you awake?"

“The spring inside was just weak. After all, it’s an old flashlight.”

Inako sat down next to Yoshito, brushing her short hair back behind her ear. Yoshito stared at Inako with a dazed expression, and when Inako tilted her head to the side , he hurriedly looked away.

“Is there something wrong with my hair?”

“...No, I just thought that without much effort, you could show off a woman’s weapon. A glimpse of the white nape of your neck under your hair, revealed by a slight gesture. Once that’s shown, even the toughest man would be taken down in one blow.”

Yoshikazu glanced at Inako’s body with a glance and shook his head regretfully.

“If you have a body like neriyokan , you can only compete with a nape like that.”

When I pinched his side hard for his rude comment, Yoshikazu let out a pathetic scream.

“I don’t care about the nape. I wanted to grow my hair as long as my sister’s.”

“So you plan to style it like a schoolgirl with a hisa-gami ? The current length is just right; there’s no need to tie it up, and washing it is easy. It’s truly a rational hairstyle suitable for the new century.”

Yoshikazu clapped his hands and said, “Alright!”

“From now on, that hair will be named ‘Twentieth Century Hair’.”

“I don’t get it,” Inako said in disbelief, but soon burst out laughing softly, “Well, thank you.” She had been feeling down since her hair got shorter, but perhaps she was able to

smile genuinely.

A bead of sweat trickled down Kihachi's temple, perhaps due to the heat, as he awkwardly turned his face away from Inako. When Inako took out a handkerchief to wipe Kihito's sweat, Kihachi recoiled, saying, “What’s this all of a sudden?”

“You’re sweating a lot, so I thought I’d wipe it off.”

“Didn’t you catch a mouse with that handkerchief?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Inako stuck out her tongue, and the two of them burst into laughter at the same time.

“Still, I can’t get used to the humidity in Kyoto. I’d even want a refrigerator.”

“A refrigerator?”

“It was a machine displayed at the National Industrial Exhibition in Osaka four years ago. The whole building was a machine for cooling things. Inside, it was so cold that I felt like I was freezing to death in the summer. There was a model of Mount Fuji at the entrance, and the snow at the peak was made from ice cooled in the refrigerator. That was quite elegant.”

As Kihachi placed a lamp into the projector and inserted a new slide, a colored photograph of Mount Fuji adorned with snow was projected outside the window, and Inako's heart leaped at its beautiful sight.

“Now is the era when we rely on ryofuu air conditioners and electric fans , but someday there will come a time when we can cool the whole house with this refrigerator, making the hellish humidity of Kyoto seem insignificant.”

That's not all, Kihachi looked at the sleeping children.

“If we use electric lights instead of lamps, we won't have to clean the sooty fireplace . If we can easily boil water with electricity, we can take a bath every day. That way, the children will have less to help with, and they will have more time to spend on studying and things they like.”

“Can electricity really do that?”

“──It doesn't matter whether we have electricity or not.”

Inako was taken aback by the words she had previously said to Kihachi.

Kihachi said with a wry smile, “I thought the same at first.”

“I didn't understand electricity at all, and when I was a child, I thought the electric brand in Asakusa was the fuel for electric lights. Looking back now, it's a ridiculous story about what relationship alcohol and electricity have.”

With that, Kihachi relaxed his smile.

“I learned about the power of electricity at the exhibition four years ago.”

“Did you see something like a magic lantern show earlier?”

“No. It's something even more amazing,” Kihachi shook his head.

“I saw paradise there.”

*

That day when he was taken to the Osaka Expo by his older brother Seiroku , “I’ll be right back,” Seiroku said as he went to the restroom, but he never returned. Kihachi found himself alone in the darkening venue, on the brink of despair.

The exhibition hall that had captivated Kihachi during the day was now shrouded in black shadows, and it felt as if a giant was trying to trap him in this place forever. Or perhaps, he thought, a kidnapper would emerge from the crowd and take him away somewhere, as he curled up on the ground, trembling and waiting for someone to save him.

At that moment, the world behind his tightly closed eyelids suddenly brightened.

It was warm, with a light so strong it rivaled the sun, and the crowd around him erupted in murmurs and exclamations of awe.

What on earth was happening? Curiosity barely began to sprout in Kihachi as he cautiously opened his eyelids.

And before him, the scene that unfolded left Kihachi completely speechless.

Kihachi was in a world of light.

Even though night had fallen, the surroundings were filled with light that made it seem like daytime.

Kihachi stood up and looked around the venue. The exhibition halls surrounding the main street were golden shining, and the willow and the fountain emitted a rainbow of colors . The light was so bright that the expressions of the jubilant crowd were clearly visible, and the middle-aged man beside Kihachi said, overwhelmed with emotion.

“Is this the main attraction of the expo, the illumination?”

Illumination.

Upon closer observation, countless light bulbs are installed along the outer walls of the exhibition hall and the main gate. Each of these light bulbs comes together to create this golden shining world.

As I was mesmerized by the brightness, an old woman nearby clasped her wrinkled hands and began to pray to the illumination, saying, “ Namu .”

In that moment, everything Kihachi had seen and heard at the expo surged into his mind all at once.

The blissful wind created by the electric fan . A phonograph playing exquisite music. Celestial maidens dancing like brilliant electric fire dances .

And the immeasurable light of electricity that turns night into day.

“——I see, this is the Pure Land of Bliss.”

Now, standing in a world of bliss that I could never have imagined, no matter how much I thought about it.

“The twentieth century is the century of electricity! Even the Pure Land can be created with electricity!”

Vitality is overflowing from within my body. I've never felt like this before.

“I will create paradise with electricity! If the world ahead is dark, I will illuminate it with electric lights !”

Kihachi held up the electric catalog he took from his pocket towards the illumination. The night sky of the venue, filled with light, was being swept around by the searchlights of the Murai Brothers Trading Company's tall tower.

When Kihito was about to put away the electric catalog, he caught sight of a figure through the gaps in the crowd. Suddenly, his joy dissipated, and Kihachi immediately ran from the spot.

Breathless, he reached the flower bed, where Seiroku was sitting leisurely on a bench, raising his hand and saying, "Hey."

"What are you... doing?"

"When I came out of the restroom, the illumination had started, and it was beautiful, so I was watching it from here."

"I told you I would be back soon..."

"What's wrong? Were you lonely?"

As Kihachi rushed over to Seiroku, who showed no sign of guilt, he punched his thin chest with both fists.

Tears spilled from Kihachi's eyes. He couldn't tell whether these tears came from regret, anger, or the relief of being freed from a sense of insecurity.

When I returned from the exhibition that day, as expected, my furious father Enki landed dozens of punches on my head.

However, Kihachi was filled with an unprecedented vitality, so much so that even Enki's punches did not faze him.

Since then, he became even more diligent in his studies at the elementary school, and thanks to his imagination, which bubbled up like a spring Konkong , the catalog, which had not even been half filled, was completed up to number nineteen by the end of summer.

One day, while pondering what to make the final twentieth prediction, I was called by Enki to discuss my future path after graduating from elementary school, which was set for the year after next.

“...I thought you would take over the temple work after graduating from elementary school.”

When Kihachi expressed his desire to advance to junior high school, Enki scratched his cropped hair with a blank expression.

“I think I mentioned before, but we simply don’t have the money to send you to junior high school right now.”

Kihachi had previously consulted about wanting to advance to junior high school before going to the exhibition.

However, when the main hall, which had been severely damaged , was restored last year, the costs exceeded expectations, and the donations did not come in as hoped. As a result, the temple's savings were nearly depleted, leaving no room to generate any more funds for tuition, and the discussion about advancing to school had fallen through.

“I will definitely take over the temple someday. I want to study electricity for the sake of the temple's work. Electricity can make people's lives easier, and I can show the followers who are anxious about the afterlife what paradise is like through electricity. So I want to do more—”

“What did you just say?”

Until then, the atmosphere was calm, but Enki suddenly raised his voice and interrupted Kihachi's story.

“Do you not believe in Amitabha ?”

Surprised by the unexpected reaction, Kihachi was taken aback.

“I’m asking you if you doubt the power of Amitabha, you fool!”

Enki's angry voice shook the air, and Kihachi shrank back.

“If you just believe, Amitabha will surely take you to the Pure Land. Trying to save people by your own efforts is doubting Amitabha's power, and I must have told you that many times . And now you say you want to create paradise with electricity?”

Enki, in a fit of rage, grabbed Kihachi by the collar.

“You, who speak such foolishness, are being watched by Amitabha, your ancestors, and AkubiAkubi Daimeijin. How can you act so casually as to betray them?”

As he was pushed, Kihachi's electric catalog fell from his pocket. Before Kihachi could pick it up, Enki grabbed the catalog and opened it, and the expression on his face twisted in shock as he flipped through the pages .

“Is that all you’ve been thinking about, such trivial things...?”

The root was roughly grabbed by Enki. As he was dragged down the hallway and out to the kitchen, Enki pushed aside Keiko, who was preparing lunch, and stood in front of the stove. Kihachi, sensing what he was about to do, desperately resisted, but Enki, without any hesitationhesitation, threw the electric catalog into the blazing fire of the stove.

"No!"

Despite the shout being in vain, the fire quickly spread to the electric catalog.

Kihachi immediately thrust his hand in to retrieve the electric catalog and extinguished the flames. However, the electric catalog was charred in several places, burnt and covered in ash, with some parts having burned away.

"You can't do this, it's too cruel to Kihachi!"

"If I don't do this, he won't wake up!"

As Kihachi felt the argument between his parents as if it were a distant event, he looked down helplessly at the transformed electric catalog. The pain from his hand, scorched , was gnawing at him, eroding him.

A few days later, when Seiroku visited the house, he remarked on the state of the electric catalog, saying, "It's in terrible shape."

"Hey Kihachi, can you lend me this catalog for a while?"

"To you, brother?" Kihachi said in a subdued voice.

“Ah. If I keep holding onto this, I might get burned by my father again. I'll keep it until things cool down, and in the meantime, I'll fix it so you can read the parts that got burned.”

When Yoshito frowned, Seiroku smiled wryly and said, “Trust me.”

To be honest, considering Seiroku's past actions, I wasn't sure if it was okay to hand it over so easily. However, for Kihachi, it was painful to see the damaged .

“...Then I’ll leave it to you. But make sure to return it properly. I haven't thought of the last prophecy yet.”

As Kihachi handed over the electric catalog, Seiroku showed his white teeth.

“What’s this? You’ve become quite enthusiastic.”

“I’m going to create paradise with electricity in the future,” Kihachi said proudly.

“I’ll make all the prophecies in the catalog and prove to my brother, who doesn’t believe in paradise, that it exists.”

Seiroku looked taken aback, but soon showed a provocative smile.

“If you can do it, then go ahead and try.”

*

Kihachi, having finished his story, pulled out several pieces of paper stacked on the desk and handed them to Inako, saying, "Give it a read." The pieces of paper contained names of diagrams and prophecies, just like the previous one, 《 Night Unknowing 》.

“The ‘Seventh Electric Translation Manuscript ’… a phonograph that automatically translates recorded foreign languages. The ‘Fourteenth Electric Eight Virtues Water ’… adds various flavors to water using electricity.”

While reading those predictions, Inako suddenly felt a sense of discomfort.

“Didn’t you say the electric catalog was called an ‘orihon’?”

“The paper I just handed you is a copy of the catalog… The real one hasn’t been returned yet.”

Inako involuntarily looked up and asked, “Why not?”

“Because my brother—”

Kiha, who showed a moment of hesitation , paused for a moment and said as if squeezing the words out.

“My brother went somewhere, taking the catalog with him.”

The light of the lamp reflected in Kiha's eyes flickered. He was curious about what had happened between the brothers, but it felt like a topic that shouldn’t be touched, so he hesitated to ask further.

“...My brother didn’t want to inherit the temple. He might have taken the catalog to make me give up on the path of electricity, thinking that if I advanced my studies, he would have to inherit the temple.”

“No matter how much I hate it, I wouldn’t do something so selfish, would I?”

“That’s the kind of person he is. Every time my brother read the catalog, he laughed mockingly. When I talked about ‘creating paradise with electricity,’ he looked like he wanted to say, ‘There’s no way you can do that.’”

Kiha sent a serious gaze to the copy of the electrical catalog spread out on the desk.

“Since it was a long time ago, there are some prophecies I’ve forgotten. If the catalog comes back, I’ll write the last twenty items and complete the catalog. Then I’ll make all the prophecies come true and show my brother.”

Ah, I see, Kiha seemed to understand by himself and smiled strongly at Inako.

“Creating paradise with electricity. That might be the meaning of life for me. Someday, I’ll fill this still dark country with the light of electricity .”

His eyes were filled with light. It was so dazzling that Inako couldn’t look directly at them and turned her gaze away to the window. The sky, which had been completely dark, was now tinged with blue, and as the outside brightness gradually increased, the outline of the lantern of Mount Fuji became hazy.

“...I said I wanted to go to paradise, but actually, there’s a place I really want to visit.”

In a murmuring tone that sounded like a monologue, Kiha asked, “Oh, where is it?”

“I want to see Mount Fuji once . My mother said there’s a place nearby where you can see Mount Fuji.”

As Inako gazed sideways at the disappearing Mount Fuji, Kihachi hesitantly said, "… It's about Inago's mother."

“I’m sorry for calling you a ‘ scammer ’ the other day.”

As Inako was surprised, Kihachi made a sulky face and pouted, saying, “I missed my chance to apologize.” It finally dawned on Inako why Kihachi had come all the way to Fushimi, and she smiled faintly smile .

“About Mount Fuji, did Mom really lie like that to cheer me up?”

Kihachi waited with a puzzled expression for Inako’s words.

“Even the explanation of sake brewing, Mom used gods to make it understandable for us as children.”

In her stories, Naeko always said that there are countless invisible gods in sake.

This god refers to the kōji mold and the yeast that inhabit the sake brewing process. In the kōji room, kōji mold is attached to steamed rice to make kōji, and through the moto-tsukuri process, yeast is cultivated. The bad gods that ruin the sake are the bacteria that infiltrate during the production process. Among them, the bad bacteria called hiochi have been identified as causing spoilage, but the causes of their occurrence and reliable countermeasures are still not well understood.

“Even if I understand that the god of sake is a bacterium, there’s nothing humans can do about it, and in the end, we can only believe in the power of the gods. If I continue to be selfish, it will anger the gods. I don’t want to trouble Dad, my sister, and all the kurabito anymore because of my lack of faith.”

“Inago”

“Finally, I, who am so clumsy, can be of help to the family. So, I’ll continue with Dr. Paikar...”

“Locust!”

Kihachi suddenly thrust a one-yen coin in front of Inako.

To the bewildered Inako, he said, “This is the offering fake that the locusts gave me when I chased them away, as well as the offering money.”

“The effect of the offering is still ongoing.”

── In place of a god whose existence is uncertain, I’ll listen to your grumbling .

Recalling the words Kihachi said at the Inari Shrine, Inako’s eyes gradually widened.

“I thought it was a joke…”

“You can think of me as a god. In front of me, you can say whatever you want.”

“—— Yeah.”

Inako covered her eyes with her hands, but unable to hold back any longer, she suddenly let out everything that had welled up inside her.

“No, I don’t want to. I don’t want to go back home. I don’t want to be with someone like that.”

Drop by drop, large tears fall onto the tatami with a sound.

“I try my best every day. I want to be good at housework and practicing like my older sister. But I can’t. No matter how hard I try, it doesn’t go well. There’s something wrong with my head. Don’t say I’m ‘clumsy,’ I know that better than anyone.”

As the brightness outside increases, the reflection of Mount Fuji on the white wall becomes fainter and fainter.

Phantom lanterns cannot be seen in bright places.

“I hate this time. I don’t want morning to come. I don’t want to be seen in such an embarrassing state and be ridiculed. I want to stay locked away in a dark place forever. Anyway, even if I go outside, whatever I do... I just fail, and everyone laughs at me, and I’m just disappointed by others.”

Inako’s face, flushed red, was soaked with tears, and her sobs and tears overflowed endlessly.

“I want to die. I have no confidence in living well from now on. I want to just die.”

Mount Fuji was completely gone, and all that spread before her was just a white wall.

“I want to die, I want to die.”

Inako kept throwing the same words at the vanished Mount Fuji.

*

Morning came, and the night gathering members also got up and had a simple breakfast before starting to clean up from yesterday.

Silently, Sadakichi polished the lantern , while Ito scolded Yajiro for being careless with the cleaning of the phonograph. Mitsu, holding a broom, stared at Kihachi and Inako with dreamy eyes, and Bunshichi was keeping watch at the store while smoking a cigarette .

While everyone was acting as usual, Inako was alone with a gloomy face, doing the wiping cleaning.

I brought her along hoping it would be a distraction, but the darkness Inako carries is so deep that even a pocket flashlight cannot illuminate the way. Should I really send her back home like this?

As Kihachi pondered, a voice of a carefree man interrupted, saying, "Excuse me."

Wondering who it could be so early in the morning, Inako, who had stopped cleaning, turned pale.

"It's Dr. Paikal's voice."

Surprised, Kihachi raised his index finger to Yajiro, who had brought the phonograph, and asked, "Where should we put this?" as he descended the chest of drawers and peeked from the living room into the sales area.

In the sales area, a man wearing a top hat was exchanging words with Bunshichi.

When Bunshichi turned to look at us, he beckoned, saying, "Kihachi, it seems there's something you need to do."

Was he here to welcome the rice bug? Cautiously stepping out to the sales floor, the man bowed politely .

“You are Sakamoto Kihachi, right? I am Mizoe the branch manager of the Mizoe store in Fushimi.”

With a mean , Yosuke calmly asked Kihachi, “Are you here to request a machine repair?”

“Machine? Ah, now that you mention it, it was written on the ticket.”

“I can repair certain types of machines, so people often come to me for repairs.”

“I see,” Yosuke said, stroking his chin .

“As expected of the owner of the strange book ‘Electric Catalog’.”

“Huh—”

Out of the blue, Yosuke said something completely unexpected, like a sudden .

“The purpose is about that Electric Catalog.”

To Kihachi's confusion, Yosuke uttered something even more unbelievable.

“Let me get straight to the point. Will you sell me the Electric Catalog?”

Kihachi stood frozen, mouth agape. As the words pierced his ears from left to right, the meaning slowly registered in his brain, and he let out a breathless “What?”

“The Electric Catalog. The prophecy book you wrote, right?”

“What a grand statement. That’s just a child’s scribble.”

“ You don’t need to be modest . Due to business reasons, I absolutely need to know what’s written in the catalog.”

Yosuke deepened his sneaky smile and leaned in closer, saying, “To be precise,”

“It’s number twenty in the Electric Catalog. The prophecy written there is important.”

“...number twenty...?”

In a state of utter confusion, Kihachi tried to make sense of the situation.

He thought he had come to retrieve Inako, but instead, he was here to buy the Electric Catalog, which only his family should know about.

The man wants to know the twentieth prophecy that Kihachi wrote, which he doesn't remember, because it's necessary for business.

Rather than being organized, it became increasingly chaotic, making me want to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

“Even if you suddenly say something like that... besides, I don’t have the electrical catalog with me right now.”

“Not have it?” The smile on Yosuke's face, which had been plastered on, turned overtly displeased.

“Don’t lie. I know for sure that you have it.”

“I’m not lying. Besides, why do you know about the electrical catalog?”

“You don’t need to know that. You just need to accept request.”

With his arrogant way of speaking, I felt I understood why Inako had refused to marry him within just a few minutes of meeting.

“In any case, asking for something that doesn’t exist is an unreasonable request.”

While I was curious about the electrical catalog, he was a man I didn’t want to get too involved with, and I wanted him to leave as soon as possible to avoid any trouble if he noticed Inako’s presence.

“Understood, I’ll come again. Let me hear a good response later.”

Yōsuke returned to Kihachi, who tried to let out a sigh of relief, but it was only for a moment.

“By the way,” Yōsuke suddenly turned around, causing Kihachi to feel a chill.

“You know Inako Hyakkawa, right? Didn’t you meet her yesterday?”

“...No, I didn’t meet her. Is something wrong with her?”

“She ran away from home yesterday and hasn’t come back yet. It’s about time to raise the alarm .”

“Do you have any idea why she ran away?”

Implying a marriage with Yōsuke, Kihachi noticed Yōsuke frowning with a troubled expression.

“I don’t know. I can’t understand the thoughts of someone who acts so strangely.”

At that moment, the faint customer service smile that had remained on Kihachi's face completely vanished.

“...I believe she was supposed to be your bride, right?”

“Do you know?” I regretted my slip of the tongue when I saw Yosuke's wide-eyed expression.

“I heard this the other day. Is it really okay to speak so poorly of the person who is to be married?”

“But isn’t that true? A man who would marry such a useless woman is just a weirdo like me.”

Yosuke shrugged dramatically. It was a playful gesture, but it didn’t make me smile. On the contrary, my head began to feel hot.

“This marriage is, in a way, a charitable act. Don’t you think that’s admirable?”

As my brain heated up, the face of Inako floated to the surface.

The face that showed anger when the shrine was disturbed. The astonished face when I chased away the fake abandoned soldier heihei. The exasperated face that often squinted in disbelief. The profile that resembled Noriko when she tucked her short hair behind her ear.

“Thank you,” she smiled.

And then, the face that cried, “I want to die.”

“Inako-chan may seem like a good girl, but she’s surprisingly arrogant . Despite being useless, she tries to choose a man as if she’s something special. I had plenty of candidates, yet I went out of my way to choose her.”

This conversation must have reached the living room where Inako was. Along with Yosuke’s malicious words.

What kind of face is the grasshopper over there making now?

“Oh, I’ve talked too long. Well then, I’ll be going,” Yosuke said as he turned his back again.

It wasn't that he had any particular thoughts. His head was too hot to think, and in the next moment, he found himself shouting in a fit of passion, "Please wait a moment!"

Yosuke turned with a troubled expression. Kihachi naturally clenched his fists tightly.

"The electrical catalog is just not in my possession right now."

As Kihachi intensified his tone and glared at him, Yosuke slightly raised his eyebrows.

"It's being stored at my family home in Otsu. I'll go get it and hand it over to Dr. Paikal."

"Oh, that's very kind of you. Then the payment will be made when the goods are safely received—"

"No, I don't need any money," Yosuke interrupted, tilting his head slightly.

"Instead, please cancel the marriage with Hyakukawa Inako."

Yōsuke frowned openly and said, "What do you mean?"

"I think marriage is none of your concern... No, perhaps you are..."

Yosuke laughed defiantly and said, "Let's not. It would be rude to say this."

"So, what will Dr. Paikal do?"

After observing Kihachi with a scrutinizing gaze, Yosuke nodded and said, "That's fine."

"If I can prepare the electrical catalog by the wedding date , I will cancel my marriage with Inako-chan."

Yosuke smirked as if to say, "Are you satisfied with this?"

"Then I will hand the electrical catalog to Dr. Paikal by the deadline."

"I promise. Well, I'm looking forward to it."

Yosuke said this mockingly and quickly walked away.

Eventually, members of the Night Academy tumbled in from the back of the living room, each expressing anger with comments like, "What's with that sideburn?" and "Top hat,"

while only Inako wore a gloomy expression.

“Well then...” Kihachi said, cheerfully striking his fist into his palm.

What should I do from now on?

The children chorused, "Huh?"

“Isn't it because you have some idea that you made such a promise?”

“It’s just nonsense. If it really existed, I would have gone to get it a long time ago.”

Then, with a wry smile, Kihachi wondered what to do, and Bunshichi interrupted, saying, "If that's the case..."

“What will happen if I really go back to Otsu? It’s just the time for entering the bamboo grove , and I’ll take a break.”

When Bunshichi lifted the corners of his eyebrows, Kihachi's expression became strained.

“...Are you telling me to go back to a house that I left on my own without a care?”

“It’s been three years since you jumped out. They might welcome you surprisingly easily. Besides, it’s possible that Seiroku hid the catalog somewhere in the house for some reason.”

Kiha crossed his arms and groaned . Why did Yosuke know about the electrical catalog, and what on earth was the twentieth prophecy that he had never written? No matter how much he twisted , Kiha couldn't think of anything.

Then, could it be that Seiroku, who was in charge of the electrical catalog, is somehow involved?

“...I don't want to be tossed around without knowing anything.”

Taking a deep breath and tightening his face, Kihachi said to the smirking Bunshichi.

“Uncle, I'm going to Otsu now to visit the Yabu...”

“You don't have to do that.”

Inako, with her eyes red and wet, clenched her fists and interrupted .

“You don't want to go home, do you? You don't have to force yourself to come back for my sake.”

“But Inako-san,” Mitsu said with a face as if the world was ending.

“If the catalog really exists, the marriage will be canceled. You don't want to get married, do you?”

“If I don't endure, it will not only trouble my family but also Sakamoto-san.”

In Inako's words, there was a painfulness, as if she were forcing herself to walk on an injured foot.

“If you keep being selfish, you'll get punished.”

*

After Ito, Mitsu, and Sadakichi from Kyoto left, Inako, Kihachi, and Yajiro arrived at the Kyoto Electric Railway stop at Nijo Kiyamachi. Here, you can transfer to the Higashimawari line and the Outo line heading towards Okazaki, and right nearby is the workshop of “Japan's Edison.”

“Kinako-neechan, are you really going back? Let's go to Otsu together.”

Inako said nothing, gently stroking Yajiro's head as a train from the north approached on the Higashimawari line. If she got on that, she could return to Fushimi. Inako deeply bowed her head to Kihachi, who was silently looking ahead.

“Mr. Sakamoto, thank you for everything until now.”

When the train stopped at the station, passengers began to get off in droves. Then Kihachi, who had been silent until then, said in a flat voice,

“You just said you'd get punished, didn’t you?”

“Even if you encounter misfortune, who can prove that it's the fault of God or Buddha?”

“God exists. While you're still dull, you have to believe and wait. All you can do is pray and wait for God to bring you a botamochi from the shelf.”

No more passengers got off the train, and Inako jumped onto the train as if to escape.

“I think it’s better to reach out to the shelf myself than to wait for the sweet rice dumplings that I don’t know when I’ll get.”

The train bell rings, ding ding.

“If I peeked at the shelf with my own eyes, there might be something good besides the sweet rice dumplings.”

Inako pretended not to hear. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t be able to endure the kind words. With a determined thought, she said, “Well then, I’ll repay you someday,” as the train began to move.

“Inako’s mom isn’t lying.”

The train on the Higashimawari line is leaving the stop. Inako, who had unconsciously stepped off at the stop, was facing Kihachi, who had a serious expression.

“I know a place nearby where you can see Mount Fuji.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you follow me, I’ll take you to that place. Aren’t you curious?”

This time, the train on the Outo line was approaching. It was the train that Kihachi and the others would take.

“My mother, the grasshopper, said she would show me Mount Fuji.”

The metallic sound scraping against the tracks has a tone that somehow quickens Inako's heart.

“...Why? Why does Sakamoto care so much about me?”

Suddenly, Kihachi leaned his face close, and Inako felt a tickling sensation in her chest.

“Your eyes are not lit up.”

“...Huh?”

“Inako shows various expressions, but her eyes remain dark. I told you, I want to brighten the world. I want to light up those eyes.”

“Inako-kun!”

A clear voice roared from across Kiyamachi Street, and I could see Riku running towards us.

“That person definitely rubbed their butt on the train...” Kihachi was left speechless. The train moves at a speed that a human can catch up to if they run with all their might. At that distance, they would surely be caught.

However, suddenly in front of the land, the lumber that had been propped against the wall of the lumberyard fell over.

“I’m sorry, I accidentally knocked it over while playing.”

Coming out from behind the building were Ito and Mitsu, who were supposed to have gone home earlier. While Riku desperately bowed his head beside them, Sadakichi was putting on a convincing act of crying, secretly signaling to Inako.

The train stopped at the station. While Riku was busy cleaning up the fallen wood, Kiyohachi followed Yajiro onto the train and reached out his hand towards Inako.

“Are you going to join in on this story or not?”

The hand that brought me out of the storehouse . However, this time, there was no sign of being pulled from the other side.

“Or,” Kiyohachi said with a provocative smile.

“You don’t believe my story?”

Chime, chime, the bell rang. The train slowly departed, and Kiyohachi’s hand slipped away.

“Believing is the strength of the locusts, right?”

Believing in God is my only strength. If I take that away, what will be left of me?

“I got on!”

Inako took a big step forward and reached out her hand towards Kihachi.

Kihachi immediately grabbed Inako's wrist and pulled her up. After taking a few steps, Inako boarded the train and smiled cheerfully.

“Believing is our strong point. I won’t let you be a fool.”

“I understand,” Kihachi laughed as well.

The train picked up speed and crossed the Kamo River, where the coolness of the summer floor .

The sunlight poured evenly into the train car. The scenery outside the window looked brighter than usual, probably because it had been locked away in a dark storehouse until now.

4

As the train approached the Nio-mon Street in Okazaki, the vermilion shrine of Heian Shrine's Otenmon came into view on the left side. Inako and Yajiro leaned their faces against the window, looking at the city’s commemorative zoo that opened four years ago.

Between Nio-mon Street and the zoo flows the Biwa Lake canal , and as it goes east, there is the Nanzen-ji boat landing. The incline from the boat landing stretches straight up to the upper Kakehashi boat landing.

“Wow, it’s my first time seeing an ink line other than Sumizome .”

The Biwa Lake Canal, aimed at the development of industry through hydropower connecting Lake Biwa and Kyoto, was completed in the 23rd year of the Meiji era (1890). A hydropower plant utilizing the canal also began operations, and the electricity generated was used to run Japan's first commercial electric tram, as well as for industries and electric lightsden'tō. This became a significant driving force for the revival of Kyoto, which had been in decline after the relocation of the capital to Tokyo sen to .

“Looking at the incline reminds me of the water shoot at the expo.”

Kihachi squinted nostalgically. The water shoot, one of the attractions at the National Industrial Exhibition, was an amusement where a boat carrying people would slide down a steep slope and splash into a water reservoir below. However, the fee was quite high at twenty sen, and it seems that Kihachi and Seiroku watched it from the temple grounds on Chausuyama.

The train carrying the three of them ascended the newly opened extension line next to the incline, known as Kamo-Higashi .

At the adjacent incline, a boat loaded onto a cart was being pulled up by a cable, while the boatman, sitting on the cargo, elegantly enjoyed his pipe. Along the mountainside,

the prestigious hybrid building of Miyako Hotel stood, its white walls standing out against the surrounding green of the mountains.

After getting off the train, the three of them boarded a boat dock at Kake, and the boat slowly started moving.

Unlike the descending boats from Lake Biwa, they were going against the flow of water, so the boatman did not board the boat but instead slung a rope tied to the boat over his shoulder and walked along the towpath beside the canal to pull the boat.

Kihachi said, “I’m sleepy,” and fell asleep before entering the first tunnel , so while they progressed along the waterway at the foot of the mountain, Yajirō kept him company.

“My family is from Zenshokuji, so I’ve known you for a long time, big brother. After you left the temple, we happened to meet in Kyoto, and during our conversation, I mentioned that I wanted to study English, and you agreed to teach me. That was the beginning of the night school, and later, Ito joined us.”

Yajirō squinted sadly and whispered, “I wanted to show yesterday's magic lantern to Matsudaira.”

“Matsudaira?”

“He was a boy from Otsu, just like me, and the youngest in the night school. He was a lively kid, but he caught the flu and died. My brother gathered everyone and took us to visit his grave in Otsu.”

“Mr. Sakamoto also properly visits the grave, right?”

“In fact, I used to believe in gods and Buddhas more than anyone else. So when I met him again after a year, I was surprised. He seemed to have really let go of something.”

I glanced over at the side. Kihachi seemed to still be asleep with his arms crossed.

The boat passed through a few short tunnels and a boat basin. A heron stood on each bank of the canal, and as the boat approached, they flew ahead as if to lead the way. While watching this, Yajiro stretched widely, and the characters on the collar of his happi jacket caught Inako's eye: “Yagura Takenemuchi Craft Shop.”

“By the way, Yajiro-kun, you make canes, right?”

“We are a bamboo root whip craft shop. We also make handles for umbrellas and bags.”

“My father uses a cane made from bamboo root whip. He says it’s sturdy and good.”

“Really?” Yajiro's eyes sparkled.

The quality is guaranteed because it is said by a person who has been hit on the head for many years. It is annoyingly durable and long-lasting.

“There was the incident where the current Tsar Nicholas II was attacked in Otsu. At that time, the Greek Crown Prince startled the assailant with a bamboo root whip stick that he had bought as a souvenir. It seems that this story has spread abroad, and recently we have started receiving orders from foreign countries.”

“Oh, from abroad. So, Yajiro-kun is trying to learn English, huh?”

I thought he was a funny child, but it seems he is seriously considering his future in his own way.

“That's right. The reason I'm studying English is to share this country's technology with the world—”

A finger that stretched out from the side snapped against Yajiro's forehead, and he groaned, “Ouch.”

Before I knew it, Kihachi had pulled his hand back and wiped the sweat from his face with sleepy eyes.

“Don't take Yajiro's story at face value. There was a time when a British family visited Yajiro's shop, and during that visit, he fell in love at first sight with a British girl and learned English to write her a letter—”

“You shouldn't say that!” Yajiro, with his ears turning bright red, tried to cover Kihachi's mouth.

Inako let out a small laugh at Yajiro's typical motivation.

“That being said,” Kihachi opened his mouth while watching a passing boat leisurely.”

“In this age of cars and trains, it’s really outdated that suiseki boats are still being pulled by people.”

“Then what should we do?”

“In the catalog, there’s an entry for ‘No. 10 suiseki treasure boat ’. First, we’ll lay wires along the canal, and use poles extended from the boat to draw power from the wires to move the boat. Once that’s done, it’ll be smooth sailing upstream.”

“Can electricity really provide that much power? Even trains can only run as fast as people can push them.”

“Right now, the fastest in the world is a train. A German electric locomotive has recorded speeds over 200 kilometers per hour.”

Even though I didn’t quite understand the speed in kilometers per hour, I got that it was fast, so I just nodded silently . Yajiro was also nodding dramatically, but he probably didn’t understand either.

“If we put a searchlight on the boat, visibility will be much better than with firelight, making it convenient even at night. The sight of the lightbulb glinting ing as it races through the night is just like the treasure ship of the Seven Lucky Gods.”

“Are you planning to catch squid or something?”

Inako was astonished, and Yajiro was laughing uncontrollably. Perhaps dissatisfied with their reactions, Kihachi crossed his arms sulkily and said, “I’m going to sleep,” closing his eyes again.

A dark brick -constructed tunnel loomed ahead. Just before entering, the boatman jumped aboard from the towing path, lit the headlight, and began to pull the boat using the iron chains on the tunnel walls.

The tunnel, which had no light at all, was cool, and the ceiling illuminated by the headlight reflected the swaying water surface . The light of the exit visible ahead resembled a hazy moon floating in the night sky.

After passing through the longest hydrophobic tunnel, I had arrived in Shiga Prefecture.

After parting ways with Yajiro at the boat dock , I was taken by Kihachi towards the foot of the mountain, where Mitsui is located. I passed through a magnificent gate resembling the Sanmon of Nanzen-ji and ascended the approach and stone steps.

The sound of my geta scraping against the stone steps echoed in the forest, and the strong sunlight was blocked by the lush branches, occasionally allowing a cool breeze, which could be described as a heavenly wind, to pass through.

Kihachi crossed in front of the Kannon hall and skipped a step as he climbed the stairs ahead. Inako followed closely behind, and they emerged at a high point where a monument commemorating the Seinan War stood.

Kihachi, already standing by the monument, beckoned Inako, saying, "What a view!"

As I stood beside him, calming my thumping heart, I couldn't help but gasp at the sight that unfolded below.

"──It's the sea."

Beyond the temple grounds, the drill field, and the rows of houses, there was a clear vast expanse of water that seemed to have brought the entire blue sky down to the ground. Its depth stretched far into the distance , where the boundary between sky and water seemed to merge. It was the first time Inako had seen the horizon with her own eyes.

As I approached the horizon, the color of the sky became lighter, and near the area where it met Lake Biwa, it took on a color close to light blue. Inako realized for the first time that the colors of the sky and water, both called blue, were not the same shade of blue.

"And over there is Mount Fuji."

Inako turned her gaze to where Kihachi pointed. To the north, the horizon was wide enough to see, but as it descended southward, the width of the lake narrowed more and more, with small settlements scattered across the opposite shore lush plains spreading out. In that flat land, there was a mountain shaped like a triangular rice ball.

“It’s called Mikami Mountain , but it has been known as Omi Fuji since ancient times.”

Compared to the mountains surrounding Lake Biwa and its lands, it is by no means high. However, its prominent and dignified appearance standing out on the flat land is not unlike that of Mount Fuji.

As Inako gazed at the mountain that looked like a child stretching up, she felt somewhat amused .

“Omi's Fuji is quite cute.”

With Inako laughing, Kihachi said in a mischievous tone, “Shall I tell you another name for Omi Fuji?”

“It’s called Mukade Mountain.”

Mukade. Just those three characters sent a chill down her spine, and Inako shivered.

“W-why such a strange name?”

Kihachi grinned and twisted his mouth, moving his fingers like the legs of a centipede.

“There is a legend that there used to be a giant centipede that could wrap around that mountain seven and a half times.”

Seven and a half coils. Imagining a giant centipede wrapped around that mountain made Inako dizzy.

“Well, don’t be so scared. Even if it’s seven and a half coils, it’s not that long,”

Inako trembling, and Kihachi made a gesture of wrapping a band around his head.

“ It too short to wrap.”

Inako squinted and said, “What nonsense are you talking about?” as she poked Kihachi’s shoulder.

On the calm lake, round boats with white elongated sails and steamships puffing black smoke leisurely sailed. As they were immersed that scenery, Kihachi called out, “Hey.”

“Since we’ve come all this way, how about exploring Mitsui Temple?”

Indeed, there are various halls, including the Kannon , and it would be a waste to just pass by. Inako, who had been wanting to visit, agreed to Kihachi’s surprisingly thoughtful suggestion.

After visiting the Kannon Hall and the three-story pagoda, the two entered the Bell Hall, where a bronze bell was enshrined, taller than an adult. Its girth was so thick that even two people hugging it wouldn’t be able to encircle it.

“Earlier, I mentioned the giant centipede of Omi Fuji. There’s a legend that a warrior named Tawara Tota defeated a giant centipede and received this bronze bell as a thank you from the local dragon god,”

“If you look closely at this bell, it’s covered in scratches.”

“They say those scratches are the marks left by Benkei dragging it.”

“Benkei, the retainer of that Yoshitsune?”

“When Benkei was a monk at Enryaku-ji, it seems he climbed the mountain dragging this bell during a dispute between Enryaku-ji and Miidera. Afterward, the bell was safely returned, and since then, it has been called ‘Benkei’s Dragging Bell.’”

Inako observed the bonshō again. Is there really a person who can drag something like this?

“Ah, if it were Mr. Kuga, he might be able to do it.”

*

As a boat was being pulled by the boatman up the sosui, two men who had gone to Kyoto for business were puffing on their Golden Bats.

“Even though we won the war against Russia, our living conditions haven’t improved at all.”

“If only we could get the reparations. It’s all stuff that doesn’t concern us, like from Sakhalin or the South Manchuria Railway.”

“However, I once saw Russian prisoners in Otsu, and they were built like Benkei. Just the fact that we could defeat guys like that might be something to be happy about.”

“If it’s a Russian, they could easily pull the bell of Benkei at Mitsui-dera, right?”

“What are you saying? Come on, that's just impossible.”

As the conversation reached a pause, the two noticed that the boat was swaying quite a bit. It seemed that the large man sitting in front was the cause, as he was restlessly shaking his body.

“Hey, is something wrong with you, big guy?”

The large man in the black shirt, who had been fidgeting, turned around abruptly. His massive frame occupied two seats, giving off an intimidating presence, causing the two to stiffen their faces.

“No, I just have a bit of an urgent matter, but the boat is surprisingly slow, which made me a bit irritated.”

Relieved by the unexpected softness in his demeanor, the two felt a bit more at ease.

“Well, when you're going upstream, it's usually like this. Walking would be faster.”

“If you want, I can help you out. You've got a good build.”

The big man nodded as if it were a brilliant idea and said, “Boatman, I'll pull the boat,” then jumped from the boat to the towing path, pushing the boatman into the boat after giving him some instructions.

“Wow, he really took that seriously.”

“Just because you have a good physique, do you think you can pull a waterway boat overnight?”

As soon as the two sneered , a pressure like a sumo wrestler's slap suddenly hit them from the front, causing everyone on the boat to be pushed back. The two hurriedly clung to the edge of the boat, astonished by the tremendous spray of water erupting from both sides.

“Did I accidentally get on a water shoot at the expo?”

Someone shouted. The boat, pulled by the big man, cut through the waterway with an unthinkable speed for an upstream boat, and the passengers clung to the boat in fear and trembling .

“If it's this guy, pulling the trolley would be a piece of cake!”

“No doubt about it!”

The big man repeated his deep breaths like a locomotive and raced through the waterway. This boat, which surpassed the downstream boats in speed, was witnessed here and there, and it became a tale that “a steamship was running on the waterway.”

*

After touring Mitsuimii Temple dera, the two sat in a spot with a good view of Kannonkannon Hall, enjoying the Benkei power rice cakes heavily dusted with soybean flour.

Inako, with soybean flour on the corner of her mouth, was biting into a rice cake skewered on a stick.

“Soybean flour…” she stifled a smile, when she was glared at and asked, “Did you say something?”

“Still, I wonder if it's okay for us to be this relaxed.”

“Is it Mr. Riku? Even if you follow me, you won't catch up that quickly.”

“But...” Inako said, anxiously lowering her eyes while wiping the kinako from her mouth.

“The warrior 's Yabashi boat is fast, but haste makes waste at the long bridge of Setta.”

Suddenly, Kihachi burst into a poem, and Inako widened her eyes.

“Even a locust knows the name of Setta's Karahashi, right?”

The water of Lake Biwa flows from the Setagawa River at its southern end, changing its name to the Ujigawa and Yodogawa before reaching Osaka Bay. The bridge over the Setagawa River is Setta's Karahashi, known since ancient times as a key point for transportation and battles.

“It seems that the saying ‘Haste makes waste’ originated from this bridge. In the past, boats would often cancel trips for minor reasons, so it was quicker to take a detour overland and cross Karahashi than to cross Lake Biwa by boat. Well, now that trains run, the overland route is no longer a detour.”

Having finished his mochi, Kihachi stretched out.

“Haste makes waste. How about we take a look at Setta's Karahashi while we're at it?”

“Is Sakamoto-san's house around there?”

“... No, it's the opposite direction.”

“Are you perhaps still hesitating to go home?”

Seeing Kihachi's stiff expression, Inako narrowed her eyes and said, “I knew it.”

“I thought it was quite generous of you to offer to guide me to Mitsuidera.”

“It can't be helped. I just jumped out, so what kind of face should I make now?”

“Should I bring some Benkei rice cakes as a gift?”

“Do you think it would be that simple?”

“Well, you don't have to force yourself to go back, do you?” Inako looked towards Mikami Mountain .

“... By the way, about what your mother said regarding Mount Fuji. Was she really talking about Mikami Mountain?”

Kihachi tilted his head and said, “Huh?”

“I think my mother said, ‘You can see Mount Fuji’.”

“Isn’t it about Mikami Mountain? Other than that, there’s no way you can see Mount Fuji around here...”

As he dangled the skewer with his fingertips, Kihachi exclaimed, “Ah.”

“Speaking of which, my older brother used to say, ‘You can see Mount Fuji from Ise.’”

“From Ise? That must be what he meant!”

While Inako was excited, Kihachi calmly denied it, saying, “No way, that’s a lie.”

“There’s no way you can see Mount Fuji from Ise. Do you have any idea how far apart they are?”

“So you’re saying my mom was lying?”

Inako frowned, and Kihachi shrugged exaggeratedly.

“Don’t take what my brother says seriously. You’ll regret it.”

“Mom doesn’t lie. You can definitely see Mount Fuji from Ise.”

“Oh, you said it,” Kihachi said, lifting the corners of his mouth and standing up.

“Then once the catalog issue is settled, let’s go to Ise and see if it’s true,”

Inako stood up defiantly, retorting .

“Sure, let’s go,” just as the two were about to spark a confrontation,

“Where are you going?”

came a low voice interrupting the conversation. Startled, the two turned around to find Riku standing behind them, his expression one of anger . His black shirt was soaked, and he was sweating profusely like steam.

In the blink of an eye, Kihachi was grabbed by the collar, his feet flailing in the air.

“You little rat, I finally caught you,”

“Riku-san, how did you get here?”

“I’ve been asking around at key points. A pair of men and women, especially Inako-kun’s hair stands out,”

The startled Inako placed her hand on her shortened hair and found Kihachi, who was exhausted, staring .

“The fact that the two of them headed towards Otsu has been notified to Momokawa Sake Brewery by telegram. I will take you to Fushimi, so make sure to Jin'emon apologize.”

In the evening. When they were brought to Banba Station in Otsu, Riku's eyes widened at the sight of the two men standing in front of the station.

“Mr. Jin'emon, you came all the way to such a place?”

“I had business with Riku-kun's shop, and this is just on the way.”

Next to Jin'emon, who had his Kaiser mustache sharply pointed, was Uchiwa Yosuke, who was lazily fanning his face.

“I heard that Momokawa-san was going to Otsu, so I thought it would be interesting and followed along.”

Looking at Yosuke's face, who said it so nonchalantly , Kihachi was astonished, wondering if the branch manager had nothing else to do. Seeing Kihachi, Jin'emon trembled his hand gripping the cane.

“Is that the man who took out the foolish daughter?”

Then, spotting Inako, Jin'emon raised his cane towards her without hesitation.

However, Riku immediately stepped in and pleaded, “There are people watching. Please.”

“Mr. Hyakuchuan, I know a good place around here. It’s not appropriate to have a long conversation in a place like this, so why don’t you take your scolding there and discuss it thoroughly?”

Jin Uemon looked sharply at Yosuke and Riku alternately before saying, “Understood,” and lowered his cane.

As they moved towards the Yamanote area, they came across a hidden place called “ Shokuzanjin ” surrounded by dense trees.

As night deepened, in a room lit only by the light of the lantern , Kihachi, Jin Uemon, and Riku were gathered around a table. The dimness of the lantern made the room feel heavy with a lingering atmosphere.

Inako was now alone with Yosuke in another room. She wanted to escape as soon as possible, but it seemed difficult as long as Riku was there. When Jin Uemon placed the sake cup down, he lightly bowed his head towards Riku.

“I’m sorry, Riku-kun. You have your own business to attend to, yet you’re helping out with various things.”

“No, please don’t worry about it. My brother mainly manages the store. Besides, it seems I’ve been taken care of since returning from the war. I’m using my pension to live freely.”

“The Golden Kite medal, huh? As expected, you fought on the battlefield with the name ‘Rikujouki’ resounding. I’ve heard that you’ve been supporting the Veterans’ Hospital and the Red Cross with that pension.”

“Should I refrain from doing so?”

“No, it’s also a noble cause to rescue those in distress, so continue without worry. The emotional scars from the war are there, so marrying Noriko can wait until you feel at peace.”

However, to the right, Jiroemon finished the sake in his ochoko.

“I won’t pretend to save those who think it’s natural to receive the rice cakes from others.”

“Ah,” vaguelyaimai nodded Riku, but when Jin'emon tried to pour him a drink, Riku gestured with his hand to decline.

“Oh, you’re helping with the Salvation Army’s activities now, right? Something about a prohibition on alcohol?”

“I intend to comply while I’m helping. I want to show respect to those who practice the teachings of the Bible and fight as instruments of God for the salvation of people.”

“Well, please keep the prohibition moderate. It’s a bit troublesome if the daughter of a sake brewery’s suitor denies alcohol... If things go poorly, we might have to reconsider the marriage itself.”

Ha ha ha, Jin'emon shook his shoulders, but his eyes were not smiling.

“Now,” Jin'emon said after finishing his laughter, he slapped his knee, moved the meal aside, and turned to Kihachi.

“Riku-kun, I’m sorry to ask, but could you step out for a little while?”

Riku glanced at Kihachi briefly and then bowed to Jin'emon before leaving the room.

In the humid room, the dim light of the lantern illuminated Jin'emon’s weathered face. Kihachi swallowed, wondering if this was the kind of atmosphere that would exist if there were a judgment by Enma .

“How about you try saying your name?”

*

“ Mizoe ’s main store is in Matsusaka, but my ancestors originally came from Omi .”

In the tatami room with only two people, Yosuke began to speak freely while pouring sake.

According to Yosuke, Omi has been a fertile land since ancient times, but the only river that drains the vast waters of Lake Biwa is the Setagawa, which has frequently caused floods that engulf coastal villages.

In particular, the flood eleven years ago was one of the largest in history, devastating the coastal villages, especially the farmers who lost their rice before harvest, leading some people to decide to emigrate overseas.

Yosuke's relatives, whose business was affected by the flood, also decided to move to Canada, and at that time, the young Yosuke, following the family’s policy, went with his sister to join his relatives to gain experience in business.

During this era, traveling abroad was not uncommon, and many Japanese people were going to Hawaii or California. At the time of the flood, it was necessary to pay a large sum of one hundred yen to enter Hawaii, so many residents of Shiga Prefecture who decided to emigrate chose the Vancouver area in Canada as their destination.

Unlike other travelers engaged in forestry or fishing, the relatives who had some funds opened a store in Vancouver selling chirimen , hemp fabric, takenemuchi crafts, kuzu crafts, and sake imported from Japan.

Just as many Japanese who went abroad aimed to “build wealth and decorate their hometown with nishiki brocade, the relatives who made significant profits transferred the store to acquaintances and returned to Omi. At that time, Yosuke did not return home but boldly ventured into the world to test his business acumen.

By procuring popular Japanese products for foreigners and selling them in the countries he visited, he used the funds obtained to buy local sake and send it back to Japan for sale. He continued this method of traveling to different countries to buy local sake, and after several years of peddling around the world, he had amassed a considerable fortune by the time he returned home.

After finishing his talk, Yosuke downed the sake poured into the choko in one go.

“The sake here was from Mr. Hyakukawa. It’s really good. I really like Mr. Hyakukawa’s sake; this sharp, dry taste is irresistible.”

Inako nodded ambiguously as she listened.

“Make sure to listen to my story and my preferences. You will soon become a part of the Mitsuzoe family.”

Faced with the harsh reality presented again, Inako felt her stomach tighten.

“Ah, I had promised to bring the electrical catalog by the wedding ceremony . But I laughed when I saw that he, who boasted so much, was easily caught.”

“If you help Mr. Sakamoto escape from here, I can deliver the electrical catalog.”

“That sounds good,” Yosuke said, resting his chin on his hand.

“If I keep Inako-chan by my side, he might desperately come to deliver the electrical catalog.”

“...Why is Yosuke so fixated on the electrical catalog?”

Stopping his hand that was about to bring the choko to his mouth, Yosuke snorted with a laugh.

“The twentieth item in the electrical catalog. It contains information about a certain secret liquor.”

“Secret liquor?” Inako doubted her ears. What on earth could electricity and liquor have to do with each other?

“It’s a story I heard from the former branch manager when I took over the job. Apparently, it’s a liquor made using the latest technology that could rival the national brewing research institute... And the one who made that secret liquor is Hyakukawa Sake Brewery.”

Inako was surprised and recalled the conversation between Jin'emon and Yosuke that she had overheard at home before.

She felt that they had talked about secret liquor at that time. However, she couldn’t quite grasp why it was related to the electrical catalog.

More than that, Yosuke, with a drunken gesture, took a ring out of his pocket.

“Look, this ring is made from pearls that were successfully cultivated in Mie just a few years ago. In the West, there’s a custom of giving a ring to a marriage partner, and I plan

to give it to you during the upcoming wedding . I don’t understand the value of jewels, but women must like shiny things, right?”

The ring that Yosuke held up had a beautifully round pearl on it.

“You can’t tell the difference from a natural one. Here, let me show you up close.”

As Yosuke came closer and reluctantly tried to peek at the ring, he suddenly hugged Yosuke.

Yosuke, who leaned his nose against Inako's nape, took a deep breath.

“Ah, this is the nice scent of natural sweat. The original smell of the material is well brewed .”

It felt as if a chill had swept through my body, as if the air had sucked the vitality out of me, and my hands and feet began to tremble. Amidst the strong scent of the lotion that made my nose feel like it would fall off, Yosuke casually stroked .

“Skin that is firm and glossy, without any unnecessary flesh like a sanma fish... I believe the most beautiful part of a woman's body is her back. From the moment I saw you, I thought you had the ideal back that embodies the beauty of a sanma fish... However, now that I touch it, it still feels too young.”

“It just needs a few more years to mature,” he said with a smile.

Even though it was summer, my teeth chattered. Still, Inako somehow managed to open her mouth.

“So... is that why you chose me as your wife... just for that?”

“That's right. What other value can I find in you?”

Yosuke's fingertips crawled over Inako's nape like a centipede, causing her to choke on her words.

“Your nape reminds me of a peach before it ripens , so fresh . I thought your hair looked ridiculous , but it’s quite alluring. Ah... I want to run my tongue from this nape down your back someday.”

Inako gritted her teeth and tried to pull away, saying, “Let go of me!” But no matter how much strength she used, he wouldn’t release her. The fear of being unable to resist made her body stiffen.

“Really, lately, the women liberation movement, women have no power to compete with men yet they are so loud. It is most reasonable to live quietly at home and serve men.”

In a helpless fear and regret against an unstoppable force, tears streamed down Inako's face.

“What are you doing?!”

At the same time as the sound of opening fusuma, Riku shouted angrily. He grabbed Yosuke's collar, who jumped away from Inako, and twisted him up with one arm. Yosuke, with a changed expression, flailed his legs in the air.

“W-wait, calm down!”

“Is this a situation where one can remain calm?!”

“I-is it okay to hurt me like this? You’re not getting along with Noriko-chan, right? It seems that Hyakukawa-san doesn’t think too kindly of it either.”

“What does that matter?”

“It doesn’t matter much. Just with my little remark, the talk of marriage might disappear.”

“What does that matter──?!”

As Inako pulled on the land's pants, her anger intensified, and she sobbed.

“Riku-san... that's enough for now...”

“However,” Riku groaned but eventually gave in to Inako's plea, gritting his teeth as he released Yosuke. Yosuke, who had fallen to the floor, stood up while adjusting his clothes, putting on a cool expression.

“It seems that Inako-chan is smarter than you. After all, I have no interest in laying hands on children. You should be more tolerant of people's jokes.”

Riku flicked his temple with his finger playfully .

“Is that the attitude of a man who made a young girl cry?”

“Riku-san, it's fine... this centipede of a man will eventually get his comeuppance.”

Yosuke laughed heartily, as if genuinely mocking the sobbing Inako.

“Comeuppance, huh? Where's the need to live bowing down to a god that doesn't even exist? Once humans die, that's the end. What's wrong with living selfishly?”

For a moment, Yosuke glared up at Riku, but then quickly broke into a smile and placed his hand on the sliding door.

“I'll take my leave now. Inako-chan, make sure you get home safely... And please say hello to him regarding ‘that thing’.”

In the room where only the two of them remained, the sound of Inako sniffing echoed emptily.

Riku handed Inako a towel her hands, gently grasping her hand to help her stand up.

“Let’s get some fresh air.”

*

“Are you really not going to introduce yourself? I could turn you in to the police, you know.”

Even when Jin'emon glared at him while smoking a cigarettetabako, Kihachi remained silent.

“...I heard you were threatened by Dr. Paikar. If you don’t like the beer factory, you should offer up your daughter.”

“I think it’s none of your business.”

“No, I also made a deal with Dr. Paikar. To cancel my marriage to Inako.”

Jin'emon raised an eyebrow, asking, “A deal?”

“Yes. He seems to want the books I own, and in exchange for giving them to him, he promised to cancel my marriage to Inako. This way, both your daughter and the sake brewery will be saved.”

Shin'emon's expression showed a look of astonishment. Even the stubborn old man must be surprised. He says that his daughter and the sake brewery will be saved. At this rate, he might even shed tears from his demon-like eyes.

“...foolish thing”

However, contrary to Kihachi's expectations, Jin'emon had a face full of bitterness for some reason.

Jin'emon had been wearing a grim face for a while, but suddenly, as if realizing something, his face turned bright red, and he stood up with his stick in hand, striding towards Kihachi.

Kihachi instinctively backed away, thinking, "Is it really worth getting that angry?"

“You bastard!” Jin'emon shouted, mercilessly bringing down his stick.

Kihachi, who had been bracing himself with his eyes closed , opened them upon hearing the sound of the stick hitting the tatami and a squeak, only to find a mouse scurrying across the tatami.

Chasing the freely running mouse, Jin'emon swung his stick down, shouting, “Die!” and “Damn it!” Kihachi wondered why he was so worked up over a mouse like , but seeing it as a good opportunity, he immediately stood up and blew out the flame of the lantern in the corner of the room.

“You brat!”

He dashed outside, closing the sliding door behind him and ran down the lit corridor.

*

Inako and Riku, who had come out of the room, were looking outside from the railing of the corridor.

It seems that a small stream flows beside the teahouse, but the only light is from the lantern, and the view from the railing is pitch dark, with nothing visible. The sounds of insects chirping and water hitting the rocky surface can be heard constantly.

“I ran off again. Was it a bother?”

“No... really, I was truly helped.”

“Inako-kun, do you dislike that man?”

At Riku's gentle voice, Inako tightly nodded.

“Then, for a while, you can escape to wherever you like.”

Inako looked up at Riku in surprise at his unexpected words.

“It’s utterly improper for a girl before marriage to be embraced. Although Dr. Paikar threatened like that, I will speak to Jin'emon-san to reconsider marriage.”

“But, in that case, Riku-san's position...”

“No need to worry. In any case, leave the rest to me.”

As Riku proudly pounded his thick chest, tears began to well up again.

“Thank you very much. Really, I’ve been relying on you, Riku.”

“It’s fine. This is also a mission given by God.”

“...I wish you could be that honest with your sister too.”

Riku, who was at a loss for words, suddenly twisted his face in bitterness.

“If I could hear just a little bit of honest words, women would be happy.”

“Is that how it is?” Riku tilted his head curiously at Inako, who smiled and said, “That’s how it is.”

Warm and gentle Riku. Feeling the peaceful atmosphere after a long time, my cold body began to warm up.

“By the way, what exactly is that ‘thing’ Dr. Paikar mentioned earlier?”

“It seems Dr. Paikar wants a certain book for business reasons, and he said he would cancel the marriage if I found it.”

“A book? To make the cancellation of the marriage a condition, it must be quite an extraordinary then.”

“No, not really,” Inako chuckled.

“It seems to be a child's doodle book called ‘Electric Catalog’.”

Inako was grinning, but Riku's face was tense, and his throat moved with a gulp.

The atmosphere changed, and Riku's wide-open eyes were trembling slightly.

“...Electric Catalog, you say?”

He turned his bewildered eyes towards Inako, glaring. Inako instinctively took a step back, but Riku closed the distance in an instant, grabbing the railing behind him with both arms, trapping Inako. “Hii,” Inako let out a small scream.

“You just said ‘Electric Catalog’!”

His hands, gripping the railing over his own body, were as thick as logs. In the situation where it felt like a wall had appeared in front of him, the fear he had felt earlier with Yosuke resurfaced , and Inako lost the strength to escape.

“What is the name of that boy who was with you?”

“Locust!”

Kihachi came running from the end of the outer corridor.

With the same momentum, Kihachi jumped and kicked, but like a rubber ball, he was easily bounced . Riku stretched out his thick arms to lift Kihachi, who had fallen on the floor.

However, Kihachi quickly reached into his pocket and drew out a flashlight, illuminating it in front of Riku like a drawn with a flashlight . Riku, caught directly in the light, staggered with a low groan.

Taking advantage of that moment, Kihachi grabbed Inako's wrist and dashed out of the ryotei.

As they moved through the dark, overgrown path with no light, the beam of the flashlight flickered ominously, illuminating the swaying trees in the wind. Kihachi, running ahead, was breathing heavily, and his grip on Inako's wrist was sweaty.

"Mr. Sakamoto, it should be okay soon. I'm starting to get tired."

"No... We have to get to a place with light before the flashlight goes out."

Speaking with a slurred , he couldn't take his eyes off the beam of light.

But suddenly, the flashlight made a pop sound and went dark.

He had said it was an old flashlight. It was likely that something had malfunctioned again.

"We're almost to a well-lit street. Let's walk slowly, Mr. Sakamoto."

While the darkness was indeed unsettling, they had come this far, so it should be fine. Fortunately, their eyes were starting to adjust.

“Mr. Sakamoto...?”

However, Kihachi was anxiously looking around, his breathing becoming even more ragged.

“There’s no light, there’s no light...”

The flashlight slipped from Kihachi's hand, and the hand that had been gripping Inako's wrist also fell away.

“There’s no light...” With a voice that was barely audible, Kihachi knelt down on the spot.

Inako shook Kihachi's shoulder, but his limp body was like a squid and felt all floppy.

“Mr. Sakamoto, hang in there!”

Wrapping his arm around Kihachi's shoulder, he braced his feet. He felt Kihachi's body heat and erratic heartbeat through his back.

“We’re going to escape together from here, right?”

The limp body was unexpectedly heavy, and even though he braced himself, his feet only scraped the gravel without making any progress.

“You said it, didn’t you? You’re going to Ise and checking if you can see Mount Fuji, right?”

Even so, I pulled Kihachi with all my might. Inako's breath became labored, and sweat poured from her forehead.

Her feet slipped, and she let out a small scream as she fell to the ground. The heavy body of Kihachi weighed down on her, making it impossible to get back up. Inako gritted her teeth and stretched her arms to crawl the ground.

"You will... light a fire in our eyes, right, Kihachi-san!"

Inako also exhausted her strength and became unable to move while carrying Kihachi. Just as she was about to despair, she heard voices chatting and footsteps approaching from ahead.

Eventually, as the lamp of the leading man illuminated Inako's face, he exclaimed, "Hey, what happened?" and "A child has collapsed!" Each of them was astonished, and one of them said, "Isn't this child Kihachi-kun?"

" Enki Kihachi-kun."

A monk dressed in black robes appeared, parting the crowd. As he looked down at the two lying on the ground, the man with a face as tough as a rock said, "Kihachi," in a stern tone.

5

The darkness where nothing can be seen is terrifying.

The main hall and attic without light, the entrance to the tunnel where nothing can be seen, and the telephone poles lining the night road.

Since childhood, I found such things inexplicably eerie and was simply terrified of them.

“——Hachi, Kihachi , are you okay?”

When I woke up, I saw the usual ceiling with wood grain resembling a turtle's shape. Feeling the morning sunlight through the shojishoji, I found Kihachi, who was exhausted in his futon, being SeirokuSeiroku peering in.

“Did you faint again?” With words that sounded like someone else's, Kihachi thought about whose fault it was that he ended up like this. He removed the damp cloth from his forehead and looked at the extinguished oil lamp.

The rejection of the darkness, which he had always struggled with, had grown stronger since the exhibition, to the point of fainting. He remembered the moment he accidentally extinguished the lamp last night, the crowd writhing, and the eerie black exhibition hall standing still in the night, and he recalled feeling suddenly short of breath and his palpitationspalpitations becoming painful.

Feeling a dull heaviness in his head, Kihachi gazed at Seiroku's completely cropped hair.

In February of the 37th year of Meiji (1904), six months after the exhibition closed, the war with Russia, which had been in conflict over Korea and Manchuria, finally began. Since December of the previous year, Seiroku had been enlisted in the 9th Regiment in Otsu, and it was a time when it wouldn't be surprising if a mobilization order was issued. However, recently, on holidays, Seiroku seemed to have been wandering around

the city, and some people said they saw him soaking in the magic lantern shop at a friend's house in Otsu.

While feeling exasperated at Seiroku, who had shown up at home after a long time, Kihachi glanced at the pocket flashlight by his pillow.

“This thing is no use at all even at night.”

“Did you get it from Santakuro ?”

This flashlight was given to me last December by a friend of Seiroku named Santakuro. However, I didn't meet him directly; it was placed by my pillow while I was asleep.

Seiroku said that Santakuro is a man who indulges in the eccentric hobby of distributing gifts to children every December, but he is not good at talking to people and secretly places the gifts by their pillows at night.

This flashlight I received from Santakuro, however, lacks the essential batteries and has become a useless item.

"I wanted a catalog more than this."

This was an implicit plea to Seiroku to quickly return the catalog I had entrusted to him, but Seiroku, seemingly unconcerned, laughed without a care, saying, "Well, that's just perfect."

"I have good news. It seems that this December, that Santakuro will come again. This time, the gift is... the electric catalog you have been eagerly waiting for."

With muddy Western shoes, I felt as if my heart had been kicked.

"That's all lies!"

Kannin Kihachi, whose patience had run out, hesitated for a moment before laughing while scratching his head.

"It's not a lie. He really will come. Can't you believe what I'm saying?"

"I can't believe it!"

In response to Kiyoroku's immediate answer, Kihachi seemed taken aback.

“It’s always been like that... When I was told, ‘There’s a giant centipede,’ and taken to Mikami Mountain , in the end, there was nothing there, and I almost got lost in the mountains. When I was told, ‘There’s a monster in Lake Biwa,’ and put on a boat, the bottom of the boat had a hole, and I almost drowned drowning . I trusted my brother, and I’ve always had a terrible time suffering .”

After a brief silence, Kiyoroku opened his mouth and said, “Well then.”

“Well then, if Santakuro brings the electrical catalog, you’ll believe me, right?”

“...I understand, I’ll believe you,” Kihachi said, glaring at Kiyoroku with eyes that were moist.

“If you can do it, then go ahead and try. It’s bound to be a lie again anyway.”

Kihachi, feeling a tightness in his chest, said with great effort.

“Do you really not want to take over the temple that much? Even to the point of taking the catalog away from me?”

“Hey, hey, what are you talking about?”

“I’m done with studying electricity and middle school. As you wish, I’ll work at the temple after finishing elementary school.”

He slipped past Kiyoko and left the room. Feeling the chill of March, he entered the earthen floor and saw his mother Kei doing the dishes. As soon as she noticed Kihachi, she rushed over with a relieved expression, saying, "Good, you’re awake."

“I was woken up by my brother,” she said sarcastically, and for some reason, Kei's expression clouded over.

She bent down to Kihachi's eye level, placed her hands on both shoulders, and then said in a way that seemed to comfort him.

“...I just want to be by that kid's side a little longer. I heard that a mobilization order was issued for the 9th Regiment today.”

Kihachi was repeating the words spun out in Kei's somber voice in his head, weaving together.

“Mobilization... Brother, are you going to war?”

As I felt something cold and heavy sinking in the pit of my stomach,

“What are you doing?!” suddenly echoed throughout the house, a roaringshouting of Enki, and the two, startled, turned towards the source of the voice.

Upon entering the back room, Seiroku was standing on a stool, closing the door of the shrine that had never been opened.

──If the shrine is opened, the Akubi Great Deity's spirit will escape, bringing misfortune to the family.

Seiroku casually opened the shrine that had been warned about so many times.

“I was really curious about what was inside, so I thought I’d take a look before going to war.”

Facing Kihachi, who couldn't grasp the reality in front of him, Seiroku smiled.

“I directly worshipped the form of the god you believe in more than electricity.”

Before Kihachi could grab him, Enki had already punched Seiroku away.

After thoroughly beating Seiroku, Enki finally calmed down and spoke to the family in the back room.

“Right now, let’s go to Inari and have Oda-san perform a ritual . We need the god to come back.”

Seiroku laughed dryly at Enki, who said it very seriously.

“Even if we had a ritual , how would we know if the god actually came back? Besides, this is a temple. If you keep talking about gods, the already few followers .”

Ignoring Seiroku's light-hearted remark, Enki looked at Kihachi with bloodshot eyes.

“Kihachi. We’re going to Inari together now.”

Kihachi was astonished. If they were to depart now, he wouldn't be able to see Seiroku off when he returned to the barracks in the evening.

“There’s no need for such a farce. We have time before departure, so why not go fishing at Lake Biwa?”

“Shut up! If we’re even a day late, who knows what misfortune will befall this house?”

Kihachi hesitated. Today would likely be the last day he could spend with Seiroku.

But what if he left the matter of the closed shrine unresolved and it truly led to a disastrous outcome?

What if that disaster took the form of Seiroku’s death?

Wait, a dark voice whispered in his ear. The wrath of the gods isn’t limited to just Seiroku’s death. Wasn’t it Seiroku who sowed the seeds of this situation? To easily forgive someone like Seiroku and go fishing together?

It’s fine. As Enki said, if we redo the prayer, the returning deity will protect the house.

Kihachi steeled himself and said, “Alright, I’ll go with you, Dad,” as he stood up.

After getting ready and finishing putting on his geta at the entrance, Seiroku called out from behind, “Hey, hey, it’s the last day, where are you going?” but Kihachi tried to follow Enki.

“Kihachi,” he was grabbed by the shoulder and reluctantly turned around, where Seiroku showed a carefree smile.

“Don’t cry even if you fall on the way.”

They mock you endlessly──.

“It would be good for you, brother, to experience pain just once in the war!”

Kihachi shook off his hand and turned his back on Seiroku, who maintained his smile, and started walking towards Kyoto.

The prayer at Inari Shrine took half a day, and by the time he returned to Otsu, Seiroku had already left.

As Enki joined his hands in prayer at the closed shrine, he wore a satisfied expression, saying, “With this, Seiroku will be fine,” when Bunshichi, unusually pale, came into the inner room.

“Did that guy Seiroku open Akubi-san’s shrine?”

“Yeah. But since we had a prayer from Odai-san, the deity should have returned.”

“...Is that so?” Bunshichi started to say something but then closed his mouth. Even though the deity should have safely returned, Kihachi felt an inexplicable unease.

In May, news arrived that the Second Army, to which Seiroku belonged, had occupied the fortress at the Liaodong Peninsula, Nanzan. The village was filled with joy, and Enki was praising Seiroku’s achievements.

When Kihachi saw Seiroku return, he thought to himself, "I'm glad I prayed for this," and smiled proudly.

And if I honestly apologize, I will quickly get the electrical catalog back and go wherever I like, whether it's fishing or anything else. Kihachi was thinking about what would happen after Seiroku returned, with such optimism.

So, when the public announcement of casualties arrived some time after the occupation of Nanzan.

When the name "Sakamoto Seiroku" was written in that announcement.

At first, I thought it must be someone else, feeling as if it were someone else's business.

Finally realizing that I had no acquaintances other than my brother named Seiroku, my mind and body gradually became something otherworldly, and eventually, I could think of nothing at all.

The remains returned from the battlefield. Hearing my mother's cries and Bunshichi saying, "You did well, Seiroku," even then, Kihachi could not believe that those bones were Seiroku's.

Although they were a bit thin and had some flesh, it was Seiroku who would grab Kihachi's arm with his slender hands and take him around, always laughing cheerfully. There was no way these fragments could be Seiroku.

During Seiroku's funeral, the chief mourner, Enki, spoke solemnly to the attendees.

"Seiroku was a mischievous boy, an uncontrollable child. However, when I truly feel the death of my son like this, I suddenly think he was a beloved and wonderful child."

Kihachi was listening to Enki's words from the far reaches of his consciousness.

“Before his expedition, Akuhiko committed the foolish act of opening the shrine of the Great God Akuhiko. In response, the deity imposed the heavy punishment of 'death.' I

deeply regret that I could not teach Kiyoroku about the heart of the Buddha and the divine virtue of the Great God Akuhiko before this happened."

What's that? A small fire ignited in Kihachi's heart.

He even went all the way to the shrine of Inari Mountain to have the deity return. He confidently paid a high prayer fee and said, "This will be fine."

As everyone chanted the Shoshinkyo of the Zenshokuji sect, Kihachi was lost in thought.

People who have never been there say that chanting the name of the Buddha will lead you to the Pure Land.

While visiting a shrine can bring blessings from the deity, in the end, if you don't put in the effort yourself, the deity won't push you along. If that's the case, what difference does it make whether deities exist or not?

Even if you offer Buddhist rice and shinsen as offerings, no one eats it. Even if you create a splendid coffin, the deceased won't be pleased. How can you know that you've gained divine virtue by waving around a oonusa ?

If gods and Buddhas truly exist, why don't they show themselves a little?

All emotions swelled to their limits, and finally, something in his head burst.

He stood up, grabbed the incense burner nearby, and threw it toward the honzon . The incense burner shattered against the door of the palace , scattering ash all over the floor. The chanting of the Shoshinkyo stopped, and Enki was filled with rage and collided with it.

"Kihachi, what are you exposing!"

"If you're there, come out!" Kihachi shouted towards the palace.

"If you're really there, show yourself! I'll beat you up!"

Kihachi dashed out of the main hall. He ran through the village, along the path .

Everyone is just a bunch of liars. Gods, Buddhas, and even Seiroku.

The remains that are said to be Seiroku are also a lie. They do not resemble the brother I know.

In that case, Kihachi stopped in his tracks.

If those remains are not Seiroku, and if there is no world of paradise after death.

Where on earth has Seiroku gone?

When Kihachi woke up, he saw the familiar ceiling with a wood grain resembling a turtle. Ah, have I returned? As he dazedly lay on the futon, Kei peeked in .

With a thin expressionless face, Kei touched Kihachi's cheeks and forehead with his hand gently . His hands, worn from years of household chores, were rough and cold. The face with a fringe looked even more haggard than when they last met.

"Yesterday, I told you to come over since breakfast is ready."

Kei said that and quickly left. As I lay on my back, I struggled to find the right words after not seeing each other for about three years, and suddenly I became worried about Inako , jumping out of bed immediately.

"Ah."

As I followed Kei into the wooden room, I locked eyes with Inako, who was frozen with a piece of pickled vegetable still in her mouth.

Inako swallowed the pickled vegetable, set her chopsticks down on the tray, and awkwardly bowed her head, saying, "...You came."

"Ah, yeah," Kihachi replied, smoothing down his bedhead as he sat down at the adjacent tray.

"I'm sorry about yesterday. It seems I caused you trouble."

"I didn't do anything. It was Enki-san who carried you to the nearby kuruma ."

When my father's name suddenly came up, I felt a tightness in my stomach, and Kei continued.

"Dad was passing by after the kyū ceremony."

While surprised by the actions of Enki, I inwardly cursed, "It would have been better if you had just left me alone."

“So, what about Dad?”

Irori has only three trays in the wooden room, and Enki's figure is nowhere to be seen.

“Dad is out for some errands,” said Kei, and Kihachi felt a moment of relief as he picked up his chopsticks.

“I heard from Inako-chan yesterday that he came back to look for the electrical catalog.”

Kei smiled faintly at Kihachi, who had stopped his hand before drinking the soup.

“Before that, there’s something we need to do first.”

Prompted by Kei to “go greet Seiroku,” the two finished their breakfast and headed to the grave.

Kihachi was born in a village located just between the northern Sakamoto Village and the southern Otsu City, at a slightly elevated position at the foot of the mountain. From here, one can see not only Lake Biwa but also the town of Kusatsu across the shore, the fields, and Mikami Mountain .

Since the weather was suspicious, Kihachi held an umbrella in his hand as he walked along the ridge path , while Inako, walking a little behind him, held a bouquet of flowers with both hands, and occasionally, the scent of the flowers tickled his nose in the breeze.

“I heard various stories from Kei, but I didn’t know that my brother had passed away.”

To the startled Inako, Kihachi smiled and said, "I just hadn't mentioned it. Don't worry about it."

The cemetery is located on the outskirts of the village. On the Sakamoto family's land, wooden and stone markers are erected for each ancestor, and in front of them stands Seiroku's brand new marker.

"I've come here. Aren't you going to return the inventory?"

Kihachi began to tap Seiroku's marker with the umbrella he was holding, like a wooden fish drumming .

"If you keep that up, your brother will come back as a ghost."

"That's fine, if he's here, let him come out. I'll give him a beating."

On the way here, Inako told me about what happened at the restaurant yesterday.

Yosuke said that item twenty in the electrical inventory mentions the secret sake of Momokawa brewery. The connection between Momokawa and the electrical inventory was completely unexpected, and I don't understand why Riku changed so drastically regarding the electrical inventory.

Kihachi, with his hands together, glared at the grave, demanding, "Come back as a ghost and explain yourself."

"You're still as rude as ever."

The grasshopper, offering flowers, closed its eyes and joined its hands in prayer. Since it took quite a long time, Kihachi, who had been neglected , looked at the grayish Lake Biwa under the cloudy sky.

In the fields at the moment, an old man with a headscarf is diligently working on the farm, and the cool breeze that occasionally blows not only relieves the summer heat but also carries the voices of clam sellers and the laughter of children.

“...Speaking of which, my brother used to look at Lake Biwa from this grave.”

When Kihachi muttered this, Inako, who had finished her prayers, blinked in surprise.

“My brother liked high places, and when he worked at the Buddhist altar shop, he often went up Great Deity's mound.”

“Huh? Seiroku-san doesn’t believe in gods, right?”

“It seems he only looked at the scenery without praying. Well, that’s what I heard from my uncle .”

Inako glanced sideways at Lake Biwa, gently placing her hand on her hair blown by the wind.

“Kihachi-san, you’ve been living at the Hōrai Buddhist altar shop for a long time since you left the temple, right?”

“My uncle took me in. Even though the altar shop probably didn’t make much profit at all, he still covered my school fees. Thanks to that, I was able to attend middle school and continue my studies in electricity. ...When I help out at the shop and deliver to Inari

Shrine, I sometimes go up to the Akubi Great Deity's mound and think while gazing at the scenery. ‘What did my brother see from here?’”

Noticing Inako staring at him with round eyes, Kihachi realized he had become too sentimental.

“Well then, let’s hurry back and look for the catalog,” I said, trying to leave the grave quickly, but as soon as I made eye contact with a figure approaching from the other side, I froze in place.

Dressed in black with a straight back, the figure had a face as tough as rock that I could never forget.

It was the figure of my father, Enki, whom I hadn’t seen in several years.

Staring at me with eyes like a katana , Kihachi held his breath, bracing for a barrage of insults.

However, Enki instantly crumpled that tough face into a smile and said,

“The mischievous boy has come back,” he laughed.

In shock at my father’s unexpected reaction, Kihachi stood there dumbfounded.

“Inako-chan, thank you very much for yesterday. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. I really appreciated being able to stay over.”

Ignoring Kihachi, Enki exchanged greetings with Inako in a very calm manner.

“By the way, Inako-chan, do you have any plans for today?”

When suddenly asked, Inako stammered, "Is it from now on?"

“Alright, let’s go,” Enki said to himself, grabbing Inako and Kihachi by the arms and starting to walk with big strides.

“From now on, I’ll need your help with work.”

── Inari Shrine, perhaps I was tricked by a fox.

While sitting in seiza in the corner of the Buddhist room, Kihachi secretly wet his eyebrows with saliva. Koku-eKoku-e was wearing a Gojo kesakesa and was chanting the Amida Sutra while ringing the hyoshigihyoshigi in front of the altar.

Though I was told to help, since arriving at a certain monkmonto's house for the memorial service, I had only been given a furoshiki containing Buddhist implements, enduring the heat of summer and the crowd of people crammed into the Buddhist room, just sitting quietly in the corner alongside Inako.

When the Amida Sutra ended, the host realized that the incense had not been passed around, but upon seeing Enki chuckle and say, “Then let’s do it during the next Shoshin Ge,” Kihachi was taken aback.

Enki was strict about even the type of candles and the manner of actions. If a monk placed their prayer beads or scriptures directly on the tatami, he would yell, so the number of monks who left Obi and Zenshokuji was certainly not small.

After the chanting of the Shoshin Ge by all the monks was finished, Enki turned to face them.

“Well, today we have held the third memorial service for this grandfather, who was quite a help to me during his lifetime. I believe his family understood this deeply, but he was quite the heavy drinker. If we were to offer even a single cup of sake at his grave, I think he would come out saying, ‘Not enough!’ Such was his love for alcohol.”

As laughter arises around the family, the atmosphere becomes harmonious.

“Now, every time we have a memorial service, I need to come up with something new, but even I am starting to run out of material,” Enki said, snapping the fan he held to create a pause.

“These days, even in such a rural area, I often hear the term ‘twentieth century.’ As machines and technology develop, there are indeed eight million gods and deities, including Jesus, and the world is filled with a multitude of gods and Buddhas. While there are strict precepts and customs among them, fortunately, in our teachings, simply saying Namu Amida will ensure rebirth, which is quite a relaxed approach for us monks.”

“If just saying the nembutsu is enough, then is there really any need for expensive funerals or memorial services?”

A middle-aged man, who had been lethargic for a while, said mockingly. Next to him sat a young girl, presumably his daughter, who anxiously clutched the man's sleeve.

“Hey, how can you speak like that to Goein?” a family member scolded, but the man, who seemed to be a relative, replied without concern, “It doesn’t matter what we do for someone who has already died.”

“...How old will the girl sitting next to you be this year?”

“She will be seven, but what of it?”

“If your daughter were to suddenly die, would you plan to just leave her body by the roadside?”

With a forced smile, Enki's words made the girl stiffen.

“What are you saying to a person's daughter!” the man stands up and becomes furious.

“Even if your beloved daughter, who is so precious to you that you get angry about it, dies, do you plan to say, ‘It has nothing to do with the dead,’ and not hold a funeral or memorial service? Can you really accept that?”

With a calm yet sharp voice, the man stammered.

“No matter what religion it is, why do we mourn ? Of course, it’s also to send the deceased to the afterlife. However, the main reason is for the sake of those left behind to find closure. By properly sending off the deceased, the survivors can come to terms with the death of their loved one.”

With a snap of his fan, the man quickly sat up straight.

“Some people think that memorial services are just a way for priests to make money. However, how many opportunities do we have each year for so many relatives to gather? It’s a bit different to say it’s for the sake of honoring the deceased. The deceased has already gone to paradise with the help of Amitabha Buddha.

We, the survivors, confirm each other’s well-being, remember the deceased, and touch upon the bonds of Buddhism. I believe that memorial services are also such occasions. In fact, I was able to learn that your daughter, whom you only knew as a baby, grew up safely until the age of seven.”

As Enki smiled gently smiled , the man, who had been hunched over, slowly reached out to stroke .

“It’s perfectly fine for you to insult us priests as frauds; if that helps you relieve your daily frustrations and serves a purpose, then that’s a benefit for us. It’s called the merit of returning to the ocean of great treasures , and just as a river eventually reaches the ocean, our ordinary people ’s troubles are like a narrow stream, which the vast and deep ocean of Buddha will accept. Let’s not lament our confusion and fear, but rather let it all flow into the ocean of Buddha.”

And then Enki laughed, his rock-like face wrinkled with joy.

“The ticket to paradise is prepared by Amitabha Buddha. What we can do is to live our lives to the fullest, as they may end at any moment.”

After the ceremony, Enki was surrounded by monks and was chatting for a long time. In the corner of the room, Kihachi was nibbling on a biscuit while watching a scene that would have been unimaginable in the past.

When it was time to leave, as he was putting on his shoes at the entrance, the host who was seeing him off placed his hands on the entrance and bowed his head, then smiled at Kihachi.

"You've grown quite a bit, Kihachi-kun. ... By the way, Goen -san, I have a little consultation to discuss."

"Yes, what is it?"

"You know about Shinya-san who is fishing for salmon in Canada, right? That Shinya-san has recently moved to a port town a bit further away. It seems there are many Japanese people from Oumi there, and they want a Buddhist monk just like the branch of the Vancouver Buddhist Church."

"Can't they send a monk from the Vancouver Buddhist Church?"

" Zenshokuji and the Vancouver Buddhist Church have different details, I suppose. Shinya-san is a deeply religious person, and it seems he would prefer a monk from his hometown if possible."

"So, you're saying you want me to go?"

"No, no, Goen-san has duties at Zenshokuji, so I was wondering about Kihachi-kun."

Kihachi was taken aback when the conversation suddenly turned towards him.

“You can handle certain Buddhist rituals, and you still remember the Three Pure Land Sutras and the Shōshin Ge, right?”

It was a casual remark, but it reminded me of Enki's strict guidance, and I felt as if my bitter past had been unearthed.

“If you have nowhere to go after graduating from middle school, why not give it a try? Mr. Kōemon said he wouldn't spare any assistance.”

“I see, that's quite a story.”

With a large hand on Kihachi's head, Enki prepared to say something, and Kihachi braced himself for what was to come.

“However, I won't let my son go. He's studying electricity.”

Kihachi taken aback, and the master repeatedly apologized, saying, “No, no, this is rude.”

“I'll let my acquaintance, the priest, know about this, so if there are any interested parties, I'll inform you.”

“Is that true? That would be a great help. Mr. Kōemon will be pleased as well.”

After receiving a package from the master as a thank you for today, the three of them left the place of the memorial service.

As it rained, Kihachi watched the backs of the two ahead of him, holding an umbrella. The sound of the rain made it hard to hear, but occasionally, Inako would chuckle at Enki's stories, and Kihachi would peek at her profile. Each time he saw that face, he felt as if the old wounds inflicted by Enki were being dug up again, and he turned his gaze away from the two and towards Lake Biwa.

The surface of the water is a dark gray, and Mikami Mountain is hidden by the rain. The ground is extremely muddy, making it difficult to walk.

Upon returning to Zen-shaku Temple, Kihachi searched for the electrical catalog with the help of Inako.

Searching thoroughly through the chest of drawers, closets, and even checking places like the main hall's palace and behind the inaccessible shrine, which Seiroku often used,

they ultimately could not find it by sunset.

The two, exhausted, plopped down in the inner room and weakly looked up at the god shelf.

"It wasn't anywhere to be found."

Inako said this, clapped twice, and joined her hands in prayer at the inaccessible shrine on the god shelf.

I had a feeling it would come to this. I couldn't imagine Seiroku choosing an obvious place to hide things. I thought I wouldn't be too disappointed if the result was as expected, but as I watched Inako's profile with her eyes closed in prayer, Kihachi's heart filled with helplessness.

"That Akubi Great Deity's shrine has been worshipped since I was a child."

Turning at the voice, Enki stood behind the two, and Kihachi immediately turned his face away .

"That guy Bunshichi was sickly by nature, and my mother, wishing for him to grow up safely, asked the Inari Shrine's Odaisan to train him, and received a divine spirit of Akubi Great Deity."

“Is that so? Now, Mr. Bunshichi is doing well, and your wishes have reached him!”

Inako clasped her hands together with a mysterious expression. Kihachi, surprised to find that Bunshichi was involved with the closed shrine, felt a pat on his back from Enki, who cheerfully said to Kihachi and Inako.

“Come on, don’t keep that gloomy face on. Let’s eat dinner. Tonight is a feast.”

When they moved to the wooden floor, irori was bubbling with sukiyaki in a cast iron pot. It seemed that the contents of the package given by the host of the memorial service were beef, and Kihachi's cheeks naturally relaxed at the sight of an ingredient he usually had no connection with.

“Beef sukiyaki... are we really allowed to have this?”

Inako, who was sitting around the pot with them, was completely shrunk back and didn’t reach for her chopsticks.

“This is a thank you for helping Kihachi and assisting with the memorial service. Don’t hold back, just dig in.”

“Or is it that Inako-chan doesn’t like beef?” Enki asked with concern, placing a hand on her cheek.

“Her favorite food is mice, you know.”

She was pinched in the side.

“Well then, I’ll dig in,” Inako said as she reached for the meat with her chopsticks, dipped it in the beaten egg, and put it in her mouth.

Suddenly, Inako's face broke into a smile, and both Kiyohachi and Kei looked relieved. Inako, without hesitation, tried to reach for the meat that Kiyohachi had been secretly eyeing, so he warned her, "That’s still raw."

“Really?” Taking advantage of the moment when Inako paused with her chopsticks, Kiyohachi quickly snatched the meat.

“Ah, you tricked !”

As he stuffed his mouth with the meat coated in beaten egg, the sweetness of the meat soaked in sugar and soy sauce broth, along with the raw egg, spread throughout his mouth, and Kiyohachi exclaimed, “It tastes like the flavor of civilization and enlightenment!” He groaned . When he tried to take more meat, this time Inako said, “That’s raw.” Truly, she was a very straightforward woman.

“I won’t fall for that trick. I’ll eat the meat, though.”

As he stuffed his mouth with the meat, the fishy taste filled his mouth, and Kiyohachi groaned, “Ugh.”

“You tricked me!”

“I told you it was raw. You’ve only been eating meat, so it’s your own fault.”

“How rude. Look, I’m eating vegetables properly like this.”

“There’s meat hidden underneath.”

Immediately seeing through the trick, Kihachi clicked his tongue.

“You’re a young lady after all. Isn’t sukiyaki something common? Can you not take away the pleasures of the common people?”

“Our sukiyaki is made with chicken. It’s been a while since I had beef.”

As they clashed their chopsticks like swordsmen on the pot, Enki and Kei laughed simultaneously.

Kiha suddenly felt embarrassed, and Inako bowed her head, saying, “I’m sorry, that was rude.”

“It’s fine, it’s been a while since it’s been this lively. …It’s also been a while since I could serve four bowls.”

At Kei’s solemn voice, the room fell silent for a moment. Enki gulped down the sake from the choko .

“What kind of person was Mr. Seiroku?”

As Inako poured sake for Enki and asked, Kei smiled nostalgically with a grin .

“He was a funny kid, always telling jokes and sneaking around, avoiding his parents’ eyes…”

When Kei’s eyes met Kiha’s, he let out a small laugh.

“When I went to see the first electric light in Otsu with Seiroku, Kiha looked at the faces of people illuminated by the bluish light and seemed to be terrified, saying, ‘It looks like a ghost!’”

Kiha almost spat out the tofu he had just thrown into his mouth.

“When Seiroku carried the child Kiha to see the train, Kiha cried loudly in surprise at the whistle.”

What is this mother talking about? What happened to Seiroku's story? Feeling an unpleasant sweat trickling down his back, he glanced at Inako, who looked at him with a triumphant expression.

“Oh, right, there’s another story I heard from Seiroku. I think when Kiha saw the X-rays at the exhibition, he…”

“You don’t need to tell that!”

In the end, as Inako kept digging into the past, Kiha was tormented while Inako grinned the whole time.

When the pot was emptiedfurutei, Kei went to the kitchen to brewtea and withdrew. Enki, patting his swollen belly with satisfaction, said, “Paradise, paradise,” while enjoying the Shikishimashikishima tobacco as it wafted deliciously. It was a sight devoid of any gratitude.

“...If I go to paradise, will I be able to eat beef sukiyaki like this every day?”

Inako suddenly mentioned “paradise,” sending a shiver down Kiha’s spine.

“As always. Do you really believe that such a place exists after death?”

Juhachi said in a deliberately teasing tone.

“ Goe said that, so it must be true.”

“A gatekeeper who has never seen beyond the door is saying, ‘There is a wonderful world beyond this door.’ Believing such a suspicious story is questionable.”

In the past, Enki's fist would have fallen, but Enki was smiling, puffing on a cigarette, watching the exchange between the two. Inako leaned closer to Enki, as if seeking support.

“Goe-san, of course, there is a Pure Land, right?” Her gaze was filled with expectation.

“When you die, you can go to Amitabha 's country, right?”

“Well, I don't know about that.”

Enki bluntly said this, causing Inako's expression to freeze, and the look of expectation disappeared from her eyes.

“The Pure Land that is generally spoken of in society may or may not exist.”

“...Please don’t joke about that.”

“I’m with Kihachi. I have no right to irresponsibly say that something exists when I’ve never seen it.”

“Why?” Inako’s voice trembled as she spoke.

“Why would you say something like that, Doctor? Don’t you believe in paradise?”

“... A disciple named Matsudaira was there.”

Suddenly, the name of a student from the Night School Association came up, and Kihachi was surprised. Matsudaira’s family was also a disciple of Zenshokuji , so Enki had met him, but why was Matsudaira’s name mentioned here now?

“Matsudaira-kun was a child born to an older couple, and they absolutely doted on him.”

With a sigh, smoke was exhaled from Enki’s mouth.

“After you took the children from the Night School Association to visit Matsudaira-kun’s grave, his parents came to the temple with somber faces. They said, ‘I think Matsudaira was happy because he had friends. That’s why I feel sorry for that child who died young; he must be lonely in the afterlife,’ and consulted with me. I answered without hesitation.”

──Paradise is a land free of all suffering. Matsudaira-kun must be living happily over there.

“His parents committed suicide by drowning the next day.”

The cheerful face of Enki, which had been bright until now, twisted for the first time with anguish and regret.

“If there is a wonderful world called the Pure Land, we will live there as a family of three,” I left a note. ... I didn’t mean it that way. I just wanted to comfort those two who lost their son by talking about the Pure Land. But I was telling them the same as saying ‘die.’

“... So that’s why you stopped believing in Amitabha ?”

In the heavy atmosphere, it was Kihachi who spoke up.

“You’ve taught us to believe in Amitabha, yet you easily change your mind. While saying there’s no Pure Land, why do you still remain a monk? You don’t believe in Buddha or the Pure Land anymore, do you?”

“That’s not true. I can’t irresponsibly say ‘it exists’ to others, but I believe in Amitabha and the Pure Land. ... Let me ask you in return, why can’t you believe in Buddha?”

“That’s because... I can’t believe in what I can’t see.”

“It’s like the story of the ‘gatekeeper who has never seen beyond the door.’ Indeed, we cannot see the forms of gods and Buddhas with our eyes. But have you ever seen the form of the electricity that powers machines, or the form of radio waves and magnetism? You haven’t seen beyond the door either. So why can you assert that there’s nothing beyond the door?”

Kihachi was left speechless.

Enki then continued, “Haste makes waste, as they say, and spoke to the speechless Inako.”

“It’s a waste and tiring to rush down the land path just because there’s a Pure Land. Whether you take a shortcut or a long way around, everyone will eventually reach the same place.”

In Kihachi's mind, the scene of people walking across the Karahashi Bridge and the Maruko boat leisurely crossing Lake Biwa came to mind.

“Hey, Inako-chan,” Enki said with a gentle smile on his face .

“It's true that we don't know when we'll reach paradise on this boat trip, but whether we get swept away by waves or encounter a storm, Amida's boat will surely take us to paradise. Whether there really is paradise beyond the door we reach is something to look forward to after we arrive. Let's leave the steering to Amida and enjoy the journey, looking forward to the rainbow after the storm and the breathtaking views yet to be seen, taking it easy and savoring the boat trip.”

Just as Inako seemed about to say something, there was a knock at the front door.

“I wonder who it is at this hour,” Enki said, going to the front door in place of Kei, who was in the kitchen.

“...Amida Buddha says, ‘Since you’re going to paradise anyway, live as you please,’ doesn’t he?”

Kihachi was startled by Inako's downcast voice. Inako turned to Kihachi with a tearful expression.

“Dr. Paikal said, ‘When you die, it’s the end. So live selfishly.’ But I don’t want to be like Dr. Paikal. That kind of thinking will bring misfortune and lead to hell.”

With her tone suggesting self-discipline, Kihachi didn’t know what words to offer and lowered his gaze to the pocket watch he took out from his pocket.

Though the form of electricity is invisible, it is certainly there. Then, what about gods and Buddhas──.

"You are taking good care of that flashlight, aren't you?"

A scene came with a basin of hot water to drink and gazed nostalgically at Kihachi's flashlight.

"In the past, I wondered why you had such an expensive item. So, I once asked Seiroku, 'Where did you buy from?'"

"What did your brother say?"

"He said, 'I didn't buy it. Hachiman gave it to me from a friend in town.'"

Hachiman is a rural town located on the eastern shore of Lake Biwa. It has been a bustling commercial town since ancient times, and the commercial school that Seiroku attended used to be in Otsu but has now moved to Hachiman.

"That acquaintance must be Santakuro . He gave me this flashlight—"

As soon as I mentioned that person's name, I felt a connection in my mind.

"...Santakuro will deliver the electrical catalog."

When Kihachi whispered in a hoarse voice, Inako and Kei tilted their heads simultaneously in confusion .

"My brother said before he was deployed that in December, his acquaintance would deliver the catalog."

In the end, the electrical catalog did not arrive that December, so I thought it was just the usual joke.

“Maybe San Takuro from Yahata Town knows something about the catalog,”

It was at that unexpected clue that Kihachi and Inako exchanged glances.

With a loud voice, there was a tremendous noise coming from the front door.

“I can't hold back any longer! Sorry, but I'm coming in.”

At the sound of the familiar low voice, the two who had been looking at each other simultaneously froze.

“It's Father...!” As Inako turned pale, the rough footsteps approached.

Kage quickly stood up, pulled Inako's hand, and ran to the neighboring dirt floor, with Kihachi following behind.

Kage urged the two to put on their geta, and without allowing any objections, led them outside through the back door, smiling bravely .

“Just leave the rest to me and your father.”

“But…” Kihachi, who hesitated, was strongly pushed forward by Kei, who said, “I will protect you firmly.”

The back door closed, and the surroundings were enveloped in darkness. There was only a faint light leaking from the small window, and nothing could be seen in the shadows a few steps ahead. Kihachi instinctively closed and leaned against the wall. He should have brought a lamp. The flashlight

As Kihachi's breath became labored and anxiety disturbed his heart, a small hand grasped his arm.

"It's okay, I'm here,"

The soft voice of Inako penetrated , and the warmth of her small hand through the kimono eased Kihachi's tension.

"Are you still okay if you keep your eyes closed?" Inako asked, and Kihachi nodded with a trembling head .

The small hand firmly grasped Kihachi's sleeve.

"I'll pull you along."

Inako began to walk with a steady pace. Pulled along, Kihachi also started to walk awkwardly.

"I'll hold on tight."

With Inako leading, they managed to exit the village and somehow reached the path between fields . Perhaps because his eyes were closed, the sounds of the frogs and the wind rustling the rice ears brushing against each other were unusually prominent, sounds he usually ignored.

Even though I am being led by the arm down a dark path at night, strangely, I feel no anxiety at all. Perhaps my heart has stabilized and my capacity for sensation has increased, as I have become more aware of the rustling of the kimono and the subtle breath around me.

Every time Inako bounces her feet, a sweet scent different from the lingering smell of sukiyaki wafts in along with the smell of sweat and the fabric of the kimono, causing Kihachi's heart to tremble as if disturbed.

Truly, just when I was told to "stay strong," I find myself relying on the very person I should be protecting.

Kihachi felt grateful for the darkness for the first time, relieved that this disgraceful scene was not exposed to the public.

"Kihachi-san, should I hold on a bit tighter?"

"...Yeah, let's keep going like this until we get closer to the lights of Otsu."

Inako replied with a short "uh-huh," gripping the sleeve even more tightly than before.

*

"It took some time to realize that the man who took Inako away is the second son of the temple here."

In front of the flickering candles in the main hall's palace (gūden), Enki and Jin'emon were seated across from each other.

"Where have you hidden my daughter? Hand her over quickly."

“Well. I didn't see you around. Is something the matter?”

“...Even if my son is a bad person, would I just pretend he’s innocent? That’s why I dislike your sect. It’s ridiculous to think that a bad person can go to paradise just by chanting the Nembutsu. Only good people should be saved; those who cause trouble for others should be sent to hell.”

Enki shook the cigarette he held between his fingers and said, “What is a good person?”

“In the past, going to paradise was a privilege for those who could practice self-discipline or make donations, while many common people were bad individuals burdened with troubles and desires, unable to go to paradise even if they wanted to. Realizing that even we could go to the Pure Land just by chanting ‘ Namu ’ has saved countless people.”

Enki looked down at his open hands.

“I was a good person. I never even considered how my beliefs and actions, which I thought were right without doubt, affected those around me. I was a foolish good person. ...Embarrassingly, I carried Kihachi for the first time at this age.”

Recalling how light Kihachi was, Enki smiled at Jin'emon.

“I am happy to finally realize my arrogance ; I have become a bad person, one who is the target of Amida ’s salvation. And Mr. Hyakukawa, fortunately, you are also a bad person.”

“What nonsense are you talking about—”

“Feeling doubt about what you are doing.”

Jin'emon’s mouth, which had not lost its angry expression, twitched for a moment.

“Is that all you have to say? The second son here... his name was Kihachi, right?”

Yuanxi continues to remain silent without breaking his expression.

"I won't let that guy do something like what your eldest son did."

*

Kihachi and Inako, who arrived in the city of Otsu, explained their situation to the Yaya at the Yagura Takenemuchi workshop, and were allowed to stay overnight. When dawn broke, they thanked the Yagura family and headed towards Bamba .

After buying a ticket to Hachiman station and sitting in the hard seat of a third-class carriage, the train departed from Baba station on time. Inside the carriage, the smell of oil from the wafting women’s 's traditional Japanese hairstyle and the smoke of tobacco made Kihachi feel sick . He stole a glance at his neighbor.

The grasshopper by the window was curiously gazing at the scenery outside, its neck slightly sweaty, and the morning sun made its fine hairs shine. In response to Kihachi, who was fixated, Inako turned around and tilted her head to .

Kihachi, in a panic, said, "By the way, do you know about the guardian of Lake Biwa?" and instantlyturned his gaze towards Lake Biwa.

“At the bottom of Lake Biwa, there is a creature called Nushi. It is a catfish that is about the size of an adult human, and it can swallow a child whole.”

“What, what is that? Is there such a terrifying creature in Lake Biwa?”

“It’s a lake deep enough to completely fit the five-story pagoda of Toji Temple, so it wouldn’t be strange if something were there—”

In the middle of the conversation, I suddenly made eye contact with a person sitting at the back of the passenger car. After staring at each other with dazed , the person sitting at the back──Riku widened his eyes and stood up vigorously, approaching me.

When I shook Inako's shoulder, she looked puzzled surprised and noticed Riku, and the two of them dashed off in a hurry.

However, when they reached the end of the passenger car, they immediately found themselves at a standstill. There was no passage to the other passenger car, and a wall stood in their way.

“Don’t run away!”

Riku approached with long strides. As I pondered what to do, the train began to cross the Setagawa River.

To the north was Lake Biwa, and to the south was the Karahashi Bridge in Seta. As Kihachi's anxious eyes caught sight of the door on the side of the passenger car, he

almost reflexively opened it and wrapped his hand around Inako's waist, saying, “Hold on tight!”

“W-What’s going on?”

As Inako blushed and looked confused, Riku, realizing Kihachi's intention, reached out and said, “Stop!”

Just before Riku's hand could reach them, Kihachi stepped in strongly, cradled Inako, and jumped out of the train.

As their body floated in the air, they were pulled down more forcefully than they had imagined, and Riku's face, which looked down in astonishment, quickly receded into the distance, and in the next moment, a strong impact hit their back.

Inako's scream was cut off, their vision flickered, and the water of Lake Biwa rushed in, causing a sharp sting in their nose.

Somehow, I surfaced and shouted, "Locust!" Following that, Inako popped her head up, and Kihachi, holding the flailing Inako, tried to calm her down, saying, "Relax your body! Leave it to me."

“—Z”

“What did you say?”

“I’m going to be eaten by a catfish!”

“Is this really the time to worry about that?!”

I wanted to smack her on the head, but unfortunately, I didn’t have the luxury to do so. Kihachi, being swept away by the water, reached out to grab the railway bridge pier, but his fingertips brushed against it just a little too late.

The two of them were being carried away more and more. If they continued downstream like this, they would pass through the Setta's Karahashi, Nangō ’s Arai Dam , and after the Setta River changed its name to the Uji River, they would eventually meet the Biwa Lake Sosui in Fushimi.

“If we keep being swept away like this, we can get back to Fushimi. That’s great, we’ll save on train fare.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll just walk back!”

That was a perfectly reasonable thing to say. Indeed, it would be pointless to risk their lives. As I pondered what to do, Inako shouted in a desperate voice.

“Mr. Kihachi, the catfish is coming.”

What is he going to say? Kihachi as he heard popping sounds.

As Kihachi turned his head, he saw a white object resembling a catfish making strange noises, slowly moving across the lake towards him. As it got closer, he realized it was a small Western boat with a streamlined, flat white hull.

“Oh,” a lady in a black dress coat appeared from the boat. Realizing the situation, she immediately threw a flotation device, and the two of them desperately grabbed onto it.

“Mr. Stewart, we caught a person. We are fishermen who catch people!”

The lady called out towards the back of the boat, and a man stood up from the boat.

He was tall and slender, with neatly styled golden hair blowing in the wind. His facial features were deep, and his skin was as white as a daifuku. The young Western man smiled gently at the two who were in a daze.

6

On the boat making carefree sounds, the two were drying their soaked hair and bodies with the hand towel they were given wiping . A young lady in Western clothes sat in front of them. Her hair was tied in a marguerite style, and her slightly thick eyebrows were neatly groomed.

“Thank you for helping us,” Kihachi said, bowing his head.

“It’s fine. But why were you swimming in such a place?”

“I jumped off the train due to some circumstances.”

When I insisted to the lady, “This is a true story,” she laughed heartily, saying, “That’s funny.” Perhaps drawn by her laughter, a Western man who had been talking to the pilot came over and sat down next to the lady.

“I apologize for the delay. My name is Stewart Smith.”

With a friendly smile, Stewart gently took Inako ’s hand in his outstretched hand.

Perhaps startled by the sudden handshake, Inako froze, and Kihachi stepped in between them.

“I apologize, Kannin ; this child isn’t used to shaking hands. My name is Kihachi Sakamoto.”

As Stewart shook hands with Kihachi, Inako, who had been dazed, hurriedly bowed her head.

“I am Momokawa Inako.”

“…Shirako?”

“It’s Inako!”

Stewart scratched his head awkwardly and said, "I apologize," to the grasshopper with a stern face.

Next to her, a woman is laughing, saying, "There’s no shirako, is there?"

"I came to Canada a few years ago as an English teacher. I met Saki in Vancouver. Occasionally, she helps me with things around here."

As Stewart smiled warmly, Kihachi let out a small sneeze. Even though it was summer, being soaked like a wet rat was tough.

"You'll catch a cold if you stay like that. When we get to Hachiman , let’s change clothes at my house."

"Hachiman," Kihachi and Inako echoed together.

"Stewart, you shouldn’t take them without asking where they’re going."

"No, it’s fine. I actually had business in Hachiman. I appreciate it."

This is exactly what they call a stroke of luck. "That’s good to hear," Saki said as she took out a sake bottle, and ignoring the wide-eyed Kihito and others, she unfolded a folding choko made of persimmon tannin paper and poured amber-colored sake into it.

"Saki, it’s still early in the morning."

"Oh, isn’t that just fine? I won’t get drunk and cause a ruckus."

When Saki offered the ochoko to Kihachi, saying, "This is whiskey," Stewart made a sour face.

"Saki, please don't encourage children to drink."

"It's not like it's illegal or anything."

Kihachi brought the ochoko that Saki handed him to his nose, and he was overwhelmed by the intense smoky smell and the sharp aroma, coughing heavily. Next to him, Inako hurriedly asked, "Are you okay?"

While murmuring with a mischievous spirit, Kihachi turned the ochoko to Inako, saying, "Give it a sniff." However, contrary to Kihachi's expectations, Inako received the ochoko without moving a single eyebrow, seriously smelling the aroma.

"I've never had such alcohol before. It has a slight woody scent too."

"You have a good nose. This is a liquor that is aged in barrels for a long time."

Saki, who received the ochoko from Inako, gulped down the contents in one go and let out a deep, satisfied groanun of delight. Losing interest in the alcohol, Kihachi scanned the interior of the ship.

"...By the way, this ship seems different from a steamship."

"It runs on oil. We're having trouble with fuel procurement and maintenance."

While secretly enjoying the ride on the oil-powered ship for the first time, I asked, "Why does a teacher have a ship like this?" Instead of Stewart, who smiled wryly, Saki answered.

“To be precise, he was a former teacher. Now he has quit teaching and is devoted to Christian evangelism.”

Upon hearing the term Christian evangelism, Inako's eyes sparkled, while Kihachi's eyes showed caution.

“This ship is a means to deliver God's gospel . Usually, we go to Katata or Takashima, but this time I was asked by an acquaintance to go to Ishiyama. Looking back, I suppose it was God's guidance.”

“Even a mere chance encounter, you forcefully tie it to God, huh?”

“Kihachi-san,” Inako, who was being rebuked , was stopped by Stewart, who suddenly realized something.

“Oh, when we arrive at Hachiman , we need to prepare some footwear for Inako-chan.”

Looking at Inako's right foot, it seemed she had lost her wooden clogs when she fell into the Setagawa River. Inako hurriedly tried to hide her foot with her hand while following Stewart's back as he headed towards the pilot.

“This is the first time I've met a foreigner, but their demeanor is quite impressive.”

“Don't be fooled. What are they really plotting behind that smile?”

“They seem like a considerate and kind person.”

Kiha felt a sense of inferiority, as if he were being compared to himself, who had not noticed the geta in a subtle way.

Inako, with her dreamy eyes directed at Stewart, had her damp hair sticking to her cheeks, and the droplets shizuku of water formed at the tips of her hair ran down her white neck and kya-sha collarbone, disappearing into her chest.

When Kiha turned his gaze away from Inako, he took a biscuit out of his pocket. It was the last one, but it had absorbed moisture and was soggy. Kiha bitterly chewed tsubushi it.

Like a waist with a corset, Lake Biwa has a narrow part that can be called a waist. This divides it into the northern and southern lakes, and the boat was now passing through this narrow part, heading towards the vast northern lake.

On the western side of the lake, the mountains of Hira and Hiei are lined up, and in the depths of the flatlands on the eastern side of the lake, Mikami-yama rises, while off the coast of the ayame village, fences called eri are sporadically erected on the lake surface to catch chigyo and other small fish.

Beyond the hōsaki of the boat, there was Okishima floating on the lake, Mount Chōmeiji towering over Lake Biwa, and next to it was Hachiman mountain. The boat steered towards the fumoto of Hachiman mountain on the far right.

Near Hachiman mountain, where Nobunaga built a castle, a castle was constructed as the residence of Toyotomi Hidetsugu, and the castle town was developed at the foot, marking the beginning of Hachiman town. The castle soon became abandoned, and as the town's character became stronger, peddlers known as Hachiman merchants appeared, and together with other merchant groups from Ōmi, they were called Ōmi merchants.

The Ōmi merchants, who spanned the entire country, engaged not only in peddling but also in trade, and due to their high skills, they were sometimes neneta alongside the Ise merchants, who were also conducting business on a national scale, referred to as "Ōmi thieves, Ise koji beggars." Even in the Meiji era, some descendants of the Ōmi merchants were actively engaged in business in Osaka and Tokyo, changing their methods, and the streets of Hachiman were lined mainly with the homes of merchants.

When they arrived at Stewart's home, Kiha and Inako were overwhelmed by the three-story Western-style building.

The walls were sprayed with concrete, and large glass windows lined up. The roof, shaped like a hood, was high, and the building stood out from the surrounding traditional townhouses, undeniably radiating a unique charm.

When the two entered, they were each guided to separate rooms to change.

“This is the outfit I wore when I was a teenager, and I'm glad I brought it.”

Kihachi put on Stewart's white shirt, tightened the slightly large pants with a belt, and folded the cuffs. As he felt the uncomfortable tightness in the crotch, he was exasperated when the door opened and Inako peeked her head in to look .

However, for some reason, she didn't come into the room and seemed shy, mumbling to herself.

From beyond the door, he heard Saki's voice saying, “Come on, hurry up,” and with a push on her back, Inako jumped into the room.

The sunlight streaming in through the window illuminated her white blouse. Inako stumbled and spun around once, her white long skirt fluttering like an opened parasol, revealing her slender toes. Her hair flowed, and her exposed white neck turned red; after finishing her spin, Inako pressed down on her skirt with a tearful expression.

In this moment, time was indeed flowing slowly.

“It's the first time I've worn Western clothes, but I hope it doesn't look strange.”

“...Teru Teru Bozu?”

With an unexpectedly quick motion for Inako, Kihachi was kicked in the shin.

As Kihachi groaned, Inako snapped, “Can't you say something more clever?” while showing her teeth in a grin .

Stewart, who had been watching the exchange from the side, wore a friendly smile.

“You two look great together, it’s adorable.”

Inako, who stumbled over her words with “How cute—”, suddenly became shy.

Stewart picked up a rectangular box that was on a nearby shelf. When he opened the lid , a bellows tube extended, and the lens at the end sparkled.

“It’s a Kodak camera.”

Kihachi couldn’t help but rush over to take a closer look at the portable camera from the American company Kodak.

“You know a lot about it. I love taking pictures with this.”

Kihachi, brought back to reality by Stewart’s gentle voice, stepped back with a slightly embarrassed expression.

“You two, please stand together. Let’s take a commemorative photo.”

As Stewart aimed the camera, Inako let out a scream of “Eek!” and hid behind Kihachi. A faint unfamiliar scent of perfume wafted, and a voice that asked, “What’s wrong?” cracked slightly.

"When you get your photo taken, your soul gets taken away, right?"

What on earth is this person from decades ago?

“What a fool , if that were true, the world would be full of dead people.”

Even so, since Inako was reluctant, I had no choice but to put away the camera, and Saki clapped her hands.

“Shall we have lunch? You two must be hungry. The rice should be ready by now.”

“No, please don’t worry about us. We’ll be taking our leave shortly.”

“What are you saying?” Saki said, patting Kihachi on both shoulders.

“Meals are more enjoyable when they’re lively. Besides, it’ll take time for the kimono to dry, you know.”

In the end, the two who were pushed back sat side by side at the living room table. As Saki arranged simmered sweetfish and high-quality tofu on the table, Inako noticed one of the small bowls and tugged at her sleeve, saying, “Kihachi-san.”

“Oh no, the konjac is red!”

In the small bowl, the konjac was dyed bright red, resembling the red armor of the Ii and Sanada clans, just that.

“The konjac around here is red. It has color, but the taste is no different from konjac.”

“Why did you choose such a color?”

“I don't know.”

Stuart, who was watching the exchange between the two, chuckled and shook his shoulders. As

When Saki peeked out from the door leading to the kitchen, she said, "Mr. Stewart, you've been piling up the dishes in the sink again, haven't you?" Stewart scratched his cheek, looking embarrassed.

“There were shirts scattered around the bedroom. You have to use a on them, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry, I forgot.”

“Cleaning too. While I was away for a bit, the whole house is covered in dust.”

“Saki, you can clean up later, so let's eat quickly.”

“I’m going now,” Saki said as she energetically closed the door and retreated to the kitchen.

When Inako asked, "Is it always like that?", Stewart placed his hand on his forehead.

“When I first met you in Vancouver, you were such a graceful lady...”

“Saki-san, you are dressed so elegantly; are you perhaps a daughter of the nobility?”

“No, I’m a businesswoman. I earn far more than you can imagine.”

As Saki came in with great enthusiasm, she placed a bottle of whiskey on the table.

“Now, let’s drink!”

During the meal, Stewart and Saki asked various questions about Kihachi and Inako, so I explained, “ Hachiman fell into Lake Biwa while playing on the train on the way to meet an acquaintance in town.”

“Who do you know around here?”

Just as Kihachi was about to mention Santakuro, a lively voice called out “Sensei” from the entrance.

“Oh, who could that be?” Stewart headed towards the entrance but didn’t return for a while. After some time, a boy about Kihachi’s age timidly entered the living room, saying, “Excuse me.”

“Saki-san, this is Stewart-sensei. He just went to the church hall.”

“Church?” asked Saki, tilting her head slightly as the boy scratched his head, looking hesitant to speak.

“Some people studying the Bible there came to ask questions, but they ended up taking the teacher away with them.”

“Honestly, you’re such a softie,” Saki said, downing her whiskey in one gulp and standing up.

“I’m going to the church now, but would you like to come along?”

“No way,” Kihachi thought. He had no idea when Riku or Jin'emon might come after them, and more importantly, who would willingly go to a church that taught such suspicious stories as the Bible.

“Inako-chan, are you interested in Christianity?”

Saki asked the one person she really didn’t want to ask. Kihachi turned pleading eyes toward Inako, but as expected, her eyes sparkled at the mention of Christianity.

“If it’s about God, I’m interested in anything,” Inako replied immediately. Such a glutton.

As they confirmed their trip to the church and stepped outside, Inako struggled with her new lace-up shoes while sitting on the entrance bench. Once she finished putting them on, she happily tapped heels.

“I’ve always admired the fashionable look. Is it really okay for me to have this?”

Already outside the entrance, Saki smiled and said, "That's fine."

“I received some unused Western shoes from the shoe store in Yahata Town. They fit perfectly.”

As Inako lightly tapped her feet, Kiyohachi observed her intently. “What, is something strange?” Inako tilted her head. He had intended to say something else, but “No,” Kiyohachi decided to hold back. If he said something unnecessary and got kicked in the shin with those Western shoes, it felt like it would shatter his bones.

The church in Yahata Town they headed to was still under construction, with completion scheduled for next month.

Even though it was under construction, the interior was almost finished, and the small church with its triangular roof strangely blended into the town of Yahata well . A cross hung on the indoor wall, and long benches were evenly arranged facing the altar below it. Unlike the fragrant main hall of a temple, the only scent was that of fresh wood, and voices and small sounds echoed well against the high ceiling.

Stewart sat in the corner of a long bench, surrounded by young people. When Saki explained the situation, he agreed to quickly mimic a Sunday service for Kiyohachi and Inako.

“This is my first time doing something like this.”

Stewart, who had come up from behind, placed his hand on Inako's shoulder as she sat nervously on the bench.

“Inako-chan, do you like singing?”

“Uh, singing? I like listening to it.”

“We’ll sing together later, so please look forward to it.”

Stewart closed one eye and at Inako and then confidently headed towards the altar.

“Are you nervous too, Kihachi?”

When I turned to my neighbor at the sudden question, Inako said, “Your face looks tense.”

I shouldn’t be the type to be so on edge, but I certainly felt restless and my head felt heavy.

Stewart stood at the altar as a pastor, and the worship began.

He extracted verses from the Bible and preached teachings of God, with everyone reciting prayers at various points. Throughout, it felt more like a Bible study group than

a ritual. Stewart played and we sang hymns several times. Inako, though slightly off-key, seemed to enjoy singing each time.

After the worship ended, Inako rushed over to Stewart, who was tidying up.

“Isn’t there any strict training in Christianity?”

“It depends on the denomination, but we focus solely on faith and the Bible. No matter how much you endure hardships, it is impossible to reach God. You are saved by trusting in God and surrendering yourself to Him.”

Kihachi was internally surprised to find similarities with the Zenshokuji , and perhaps Inako thought the same, as she glanced at Kihachi with excitement, saying, “It’s similar. It’s strange how it’s a completely different religion.”

“So, is there a place like paradise in Christianity?”

Inako, who asked about "the other world" with an insatiable curiosity, made Kihachi feel a chill again.

“Yes. It is called heaven or the kingdom of God,”

“What kind of place is that?”

“Inako-chan, do you know what paradise is like?”

“Well... I vaguely think it’s a world where I can meet my deceased family and live happily without worries or the suffering of illness.”

“Then the kingdom of God is also such a place.”

With Inako's radiant face in view , Kihachi muttered softly, “...that’s quite a vague answer.”

“Still, Mr. Stewart is also good at playing organ, isn’t he?”

“There’s a piano at my house in Canada. I used to play it often whenever I had free time.”

Encouraged to try playing, Inako stood in front of the organ, feeling a bit hesitant.

“Hey, Inago, that’s enough already.”

“ Please , since we’re at it, let me play just a little bit.”

Without even looking at Kihachi, Inako pressed the keys, and a discordant sound echoed through the church.

I couldn’t help but burst out laughing, and when I turned back, Inako shot me a glare . Then Stewart placed his hand on the keys from the side and said, “Please place your fingers on the same keys. Let’s play together.”

While Kihachi was bewildered, Inako hesitantly placed her fingers on top of his.

The song was “The ABC Song,” and Inako pressed the keys in time with Stewart’s finger movements. It was slow and awkward, but when they finished playing, Inako’s face lit up as she said, “What’s this? It’s fun!”

“As expected of a teacher. Mr. Stewart’s way of teaching is really easy to understand.”

“This person is skilled at everything, you know.”

Just a moment ago, Saki had been talking with the young people, but before I knew it, she was standing next to Kihachi.

“Did you know? Mr. Stewart designed his own house.”

“Oh, really?” Inako exclaimed in surprise, and Stewart lowered his eyebrows and smiled .

“I studied architecture at university, and now that I've left my teaching job, I run an architectural office.”

“It's a beautiful house, isn't it? Since it has many windows, every room is bright.”

“You observe well. Inako-chan is interested in everything and tries to learn a lot.”

Stewart rubbed his chin and laughed, “Inako-chan is like koya tofu.”

“Koya tofu?”

“Just like koya tofu absorbs water, she absorbs everything she learns.”

When Yoshito teased, “Koya tofu-chan,” Inako turned her face away with a huff.

“Oh, I think 'Inago' is a much better name than being treated like an insect.”

Stewart then turned to Kihachi and said, “You are like ice cream.”

When Kihachi looked puzzled, Inako chimed in, “It means you’re a cold person, like ice,” and everyone burst into laughter . Feeling like the butt of the joke, Kihachi kept his mouth shut and remained silent.

Stewart and Inako approached the organ and began to play, just like before.

The sound reverberated in the eardrum bouncing but did not resonate in the chest. Feeling dizzy and a nauseous sensation similar to heartburn, Kihachi stared at Inako's back as she played the organ.

Though delicate with a slightly feminine curvature, watching her joyfully sway in a place unrelated to him turned his heartburn into impatience, making him feel uncomfortable as if he shouldn't be there.

After a long performance finally came to a stop, Kihachi interjected.

"Excuse me, I have some business to attend to soon."

Stewart stepped away from Inako and said, "I apologize for this," lowering his eyebrows.

"By the way, who are you planning to meet, Kihachi-kun?"

"Well, it's someone named Santakuro ."

The conversation stopped, and the surroundings fell silent. For some reason, everyone looked wide-eyed.

"...I'm sorry, could you say that one more time?"

“I am Santakuro. I seem to be the kind of person who enjoys giving gifts to children for free in winter.”

As soon as he finished speaking, everyone burst into laughter. Unable to comprehend the situation, Kihachi's eyes swam in confusion.

“That’s about Santa Claus,” Saki said with a face that seemed to be sympathetic him.

“Santa…?”

“Every year at Christmas, there’s a legend about a man called Santa Claus who walks around giving gifts to children, and in the West, there’s a custom where adults give gifts to children following . Unfortunately… Santa Kuro doesn’t actually exist.”

Someone laughed, saying how innocent it was to believe in Santa, and my whole body flushed with embarrassment.

I didn’t understand what was happening. After a while, I finally realized that I had been holding onto a tremendous misunderstanding for years. Yes, it was something that would have been clear with a little thought.

In my mind, Seiroku was pointing at me and laughing uncontrollably.

The mixed feelings of disappointment and understanding when I figured out the trick of the magic act weighed heavily on me, and Kihachi slumped down on the long bench. When Saki approached with a serious expression, her warm hand covered my forehead.

“I knew it. When things seemed off, it turned out you had a fever.”

*

After Kihachi and Inako fell into the Setagawa River, Riku hurried to the scene, but aside from hearing from a fisherman that they had been rescued by a boat like a steamboat, he had no clues about their whereabouts.

On the following day, Riku, who visited Fushimi, was apologizing to Jinyuemon for his blunder.

“No, Riku-kun, it’s not your fault. This is also my mistake.”

As Jinyuemon deepened the wrinkles on his face, Riku prefaced his statement by saying, “This is my thought, but...”

“There are still days until the wedding. Can’t we let Inako-kun be free until then?”

Jinyuemon exhaled the smoke of his cigarette vigorously, further deepening the wrinkles on his face.

“...Just to confirm, you’re not feeling any strange sympathy for Inako, are you?”

“But that man, Yosuke, is just...” Riku began to say, but Jinyuemon interrupted him.

“As long as there’s a promise of marriage with Noriko, I need you to act for Hyakukawa. The future of Hyakukawa Sake Brewery depends on the marriage between Dr. Paikar and Inako. If the brewery were to go bankrupt, our relationship with Riku Tsunekichi’s store, which supplies rice, would also fall apart.”

“Hey,” Jinyuemon said, twisting his mouth.

“You wouldn’t want to give Noriko to another man, would you?”

Riku simply kept his mouth shut. In the end, the conversation ended there, and as I walked down the hallway after leaving Jinyuemon's room, Yosuke, who had come out with Noriko from the guest room, approached and said, "Oh, has the conversation ended?"

“I was having Noriko's tea until the conversation ended, but I wonder if that was wrong.”

Over Yosuke's shoulder, Noriko was looking at him with a testing gaze. He glanced at her and replied shortly, “No.”

“That's good to hear. …By the way, it seems you let those two slip away again yesterday.”

As they passed each other, Yosuke whispered that.

When I turned my head that way, he placed a hand on my shoulder and said, “But rest assured.”

“Eventually, Inako-chan will surely come back of her own will. Definitely.”

Before Riku could open his mouth, Yosuke quickly left for Jin'emon's room. While feeling suspicious , Riku bowed to Noriko and was about to leave when he was called, “Riku-san.”

“You look quite gloomy; is something wrong? The usually quiet Riku-san is acting strangely.”

“Do you have some kind of illness that makes you spew poison? …Well, whatever.”

Facing Noriko, who was looking up at him, he bitterly said, “I met the boy who took Inako-kun away.”

“...I am Seiryu's younger brother.”

Noriko continued to look up at Riku without changing her expression.

“Did you know that Kihachi took Inako-kun out? Is that why you’re so calm?”

“I’m calm because I know Inako is safe.”

From her eyes, which revealed no emotion, Riku turned his face away and headed towards the entrance.

“Riku-san,” a voice called out from behind him again.

“Are you concerned about what I was talking about with Yosuke-san?”

Still facing away, Riku carefully chose his words and replied.

“...Not really. It’s your freedom to talk to whoever you want.”

Making an excuse, he left through the entrance, where a sudden rain was falling. He was told by the maid to take an umbrella, but Riku declined and decided to walk in the rain.

While smelling the damp scent of clothes soaked in warm rain, Riku murmured, "Mr. Stewart."

“Is this encounter also according to the Lord will?”

*

Awakened by the discomfort of the sweat-soaked yukata, Kihachi basked in the abundant morning sunlight streaming through the large window while a smaller hand than Saki's was placed on his forehead.

“It seems your fever is better now.”

Inako smiled at the bedside, back in her usual indigo kasuri kimono instead of Western clothes. Kihachi, still lying down, croaked, “The sunlight really comes in well.”

“This is called a sunroom. It’s a warm and comfortable place.”

With most of the walls made of glass, the room was unusually bright for a Japanese house. The roofs of the surrounding townhouses were low, and from here, one could see the Mikami Mountain towering over the plains.

“Do you have an appetite? If there’s anything you want, just say it.”

Something I want. Remembering the sensation of that cool, pleasant hand, the word “hand” slipped out of my mouth.

Seeing Inako tilt her head curiously , I hurriedly corrected myself, saying, “No, water.” It seemed my head was still not quite clear.

After receiving a cup of hot water from Inako and drinking it all, my head finally started to clear up.

“It’s my fault that I had to stay overnight. I’ve relied too much on Mr. Stewart.”

“If it’s a cold, there’s nothing you can do about it. It might be because I jumped into Lake Biwa and got soaked.”

“Then why are you... Ah, I see, fool catches a cold—”

“I’m glad to see you’re looking well,” said Inako, resting her elbows on her stomach as Kihachi groaned.

“And it’s a shame. I’ve also properly caught a cold before.”

Inako said proudly, puffing out her flat chest. Was it something to be so proud of?

“It brings back memories. Back then, my sister took care of me the whole time.”

“Was it Yoshiko? That sister of yours looks strict but is actually kind.”

“Of course. She’s my proud sister, virtuous enough to receive letters from Akubi .”

On the day we first met, Inako had said, “I can get letters from Akubi-san.” It felt like a long time ago, and as I was lost in thought, Inako took out a newspaper and said, “By the way.”

“Read this newspaper; it has an article about us.”

When I jumped on the news, there was an article stating, "In the Setagawa, two people attempted a love suicide."

It detailed everything from the moment of the jump to being rescued by a Western ship, and it seems that a reporter who happened to be by the riverside witnessed the whole incident. Kihachi folded the newspaper and forced a smile at Inako.

"Perhaps we should just disappear and go to Ise."

Inako let out a small "Eh."

"I was saying we should check if Mount Fuji can really be seen from Ise at Mii Temple ."

In the end, Santa Claus was also a lie from Seiroku. The promised date—Inako's wedding —was approaching the day after tomorrow, and now that all leads to the electric catalog had completely vanished, there was little left that could be done for Inako.

"If necessary, I could ask someone for money and go to Kanto. Then I could see Mount Fuji as much as I want—"

"Kihachi's kimono is in that basket."

Inako smiled and left the room. As Kihachi stood there half-smiling, the sunroom began to darken slightly. Looking out the window, he saw thick clouds covering the sun.

After changing clothes and going down the stairs, he found Inako and Stewart chatting over the table in the living room, and Stewart, noticing Kihachi, turned to him with a friendly smile.

“Good morning, Kihachi-kun. Are you feeling better now?”

Kihachi replied curtly, “I’m fine,” and sat down across from Inako. After the three of them had a simple breakfast together , Stewart went into the kitchen, saying, “I have something unusual.”

“By the way, where is Saki-san?”

“It seems she has a relative nearby, and she went back last night.”

Their conversation ended there, and the sound of the clock's hands echoed in the spacious room. As the cloudy sky outside spread, the dim in the living room also increased.

“Thank you for waiting. Here’s your coffee.”

Eventually, Stewart came in from the back with a tray, and the two of them stared intently at the drinks that were served. The cup contained a black liquid poured into it, and the aroma of roasted beans drifted in the air.

It had a color not much different from ink, but could this really be something a human could drink?

“Don’t be afraid, please enjoy it.”

Kihachi, annoyed at being treated like a child, thought, “If that’s the case, I’ll drink it,” and gulped it down in one go.

At that moment, a bomb condensed with bitterness and astringency exploded in my mouth.

I felt like I was going to choke on a rich flavor I had never experienced before, but I gathered all my strength and somehow swallowed it. When I glanced at Inako, she scrunched her face and groaned, "It's bitter."

"Is this something you drink thinking it's delicious? I want some sugar."

Inako, who voiced my feelings, was appreciated. Stewart smiled and slowly brought his teacup to his mouth, narrowing his eyes in delight.

"When you grow up, you'll come to understand this taste."

"That's a lie. Hey, Kihachi, you think it's bitter too, right?"

"No, I can tell. This bitterness is good."

Inako looked at Kihachi, who was desperately trying to hold back the grimace from the bitterness, with a doubtful gaze.

There was a sound of knocking on the front door, and a voice from outside said, "Good morning." It seemed there was another visitor.

As Stewart went to respond, Inako casually shifted her gaze away from Kihachi and watched him leave the living room with envious eyes.

Kihachi placed his teacup on the table. His stomach, unaccustomed to the bitterness, felt a bit heavy. An unspoken silence lingered, and Inako traced the rim of her teacup with her finger, feeling idle idle.

“About the electrical catalog, I think I’ll go back to Otsu and Hōrai Buddhist supplies store to look for it again.”

When Kihachi said this, Inako stopped tracing the edge without looking up.

“That’s enough.”

“...What did you say?”

“It’s enough. We don’t even know if the catalog still exists. It might have already been lost somewhere—”

“Then is it okay to give up?” Kihachi interrupted Inako’s words with a stronger tone cutting .

“If it goes on like this, I’ll end up marrying that Dr. Paikal the day after tomorrow.”

“But... I can’t cause any more trouble for the family with my selfishness.”

Though she hesitated a bit, Inako spoke hesitantly, and Kihachi felt a headache coming on with “Here we go again.”

Inako remained silent, looking down with her head bowed . Eventually, the sky cleared, and the strong summer sunlight streamed in through the window.

“So, are we going home like this?”

“...I see. I wanted to hear a bit more about Christianity, though.”

Inako's shy words made my heart feel like it was being grilled .

“You just want to talk to Mr. Stewart, not about Christianity.”

Whether she realized the sarcasm or not, Inako chuckled, “That might be a little true.”

“See? I haven't even thanked you for the shoes, so I was wondering if I could help with something before I leave.”

Her words had a tone that seemed to cover uptsukuro something, and Kihachi's grip on the hot water tightened.

“I can't trust someone who believes in such suspicious stories like the Bible. There's no way a woman could give birth on her own, or that someone could walk on water, or that

the dead could come back to life."

"It might sound like a tall tale, but there were plenty of stories that were beneficial for us."

"It's that kind of thinking that makes you almost get trickeddamadama by the fake soldiersnihaihei at Inari Mountain."

"...Believing is my strong point."

" U swallowing it whole, that's a mistake, right?"

Inako, who had been confused, showed anger on her face for the first time.

"Kihachi, you doubt people too much. Why not be more open-minded like Mr. Stewart?"

"Are you saying I should be like that foreigner with a fake smile? Then let me ask you, if you believe in Buddhism, Christianity, and Japanese gods like this, where do you go when you die? Heaven? Pure Land?"

"You can go wherever you want. Or, each god will let you in somewhere."

"...It's nice to be carefree. You can believe that dubious story from that teacher as much as you want."

Inako, with a sharp gaze, stood up from her chair.

"How can you say such things to someone who helped you! You're just a pitiful person who doubts everything in this world."

Kihachi, whose anger reached its peak, also stood up and slammed the table.

"What does a person who still doesn't understand right from left have to say! I brought you this far!"

"It was Kihachi who took them out of the store without listening to anyone!"

"So, should I have just left it as it was? Could I have refused the marriage talk myself?"

"What are you—" Inako stammered.

"You can't do anything without relying on others!"

After a moment, a single drop fell from Inako's opened eyes into the teacup.

"Indeed, I'm useless, less than human no matter what I do. But… what's wrong with being grateful to those who have helped me? What's wrong with trying to learn things I don't know? Didn't Kihachi study electricity that way too?"

The drop turned into a heavy rain, pouring into the table. Kihachi finally realized the foolishness of his words, and the fog that had spread within him quickly dissipated. But it was already too late.

"Do you think you're so sophisticated with that twisted perspective? Why can't you be more honest? Why can't you at least say something kind like Mr. Stewart, even if it's just flattery?"

Every word from Inako pierced Kihachi's chest like an invisible blade.

"Even if that person is a fraud , they're much more of a human being than you, who only has a bad mouth!"

Without a moment to stop her, Inako left the room, sobbing. Kihachi slumped into his chair and weakly brought the cold coffee left in the teacup to his lips.

It was just bitter, and I couldn't understand what was good about it.

"It seems Inako-chan just ran outside a moment ago. Is something wrong?"

The moment Kihachi saw Stewart's face as he returned to the living room, blood rushed to his head, and he stood up from his chair, grabbing Stewart by the collar.

"What did you whisper to Inako behind my back?"

"...What do you mean by 'whisper'?"

"That guy easily takes things to heart. What did you whisper to him, taking advantage of that?"

Stewart looked down at the furious Kihachi with a completely calm demeanor.

"You must have tempted him to get married. You probably told him some suspicious story about God... He can be saved if he has the electric catalog. It's not an invisible God, but something that can be saved by human power."

Slightly surprised, Stewart's eyes widened. But he quickly returned to a calm expression.

“If you did tempt him, what will you do? Will you punch me?”

Solemnly while maintaining a quiet rebuke with a composed attitude, Kihachi fell silent .

“If you want to hit me, feel free. But that’s only if it makes you feel better.”

When Kihachi released his grip from the collar, Stewart gestured for him to sit in the chair.

“For now, please take a seat. Or, if you believe you have nothing to do with Inako-chan's tears, then feel free to stand.”

Stewart's tone was filled with an undeniable authority befitting a former teacher. There was no trace of his usual smile on Stewart's face as he sat down, adjusting his collar.

Kihachi knew only one way to cope with the overwhelming pressure that made his stomach churn.

Kihachi obediently sat in the chair directly across from Stewart and bowed deeply.

“I’m sorry. I was very rude.”

When he cautiously raised his face, Stewart wore his usual smile .

“By the way, you mentioned the electrical catalog earlier.”

“...? Yes.”

“So, it was you after all. No wonder you resemble Seiroku-kun.”

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Inako was aimlessly walking through the streets, sniffling. A short-haired woman she didn’t recognize must have stood out. As she gathered the curious gazes of the people, someone even more conspicuous approached from the front.

“Oh, Inako-chan. Good morning.”

Saki waved with a bright face. Dressed in Western clothes, she held a parasol and carried a large basket in her hand.

“Good morning, Saki-san. Are you going out?”

“It’s nice weather today, so I thought I’d invite Stewart-san. He hasn’t had any work for a while, so he must be free anyway.”

Suddenly, Saki squinted and leaned in closer. Noticing the traces of tears on her face, she smiled knowingly and said, “...I guess I’m going out with Inako-chan today,” grabbing Inako’s arm and starting to walk.

“Aren’t you going to invite Stewart-san?”

“It’s fine. He must be busy with work today.”

While casually saying the exact opposite of what she had just said, Saki relentlessly dragged Inako along.

The place they were brought to was a waterway on the outskirts of the town. Saki placed the grasshopper on a boat that was moored at a small dock called Kawato, and with skillful oar , she rowed the boat out.

The reeds on both sides of the waterway are lush and taller than a person's height, with a heron walking majestically beside them and a mallard swimming leisurely. The black bird swimming with a chick on its back is a little grebe, and I was told that the one calling "Kekes, Kekes" among the reeds is a great reed warbler.

After passing through the reed waterway, I came out to a slightly larger lake. This area is surrounded by land and islands known as inner lake , and it seems that if you go north, you can reach Lake Biwa. There are several islands in the inner lake where reeds grow densely, and children in loincloths were jumping into the lake from the willows growing on the islands.

As I advanced through the inner lake, I saw a small island with just a small shrine. It is said to be Benten Island, which enshrines Benzaiten, and for some reason, a single tree pole is protruding towards the lake from the island.

"The mountain you see behind Benten Island is Mount Azuchi. Nobunaga's castle was there."

Saki pointed to Mount Azuchi, which towers over the lake, and sighed with disappointment.

"If it hadn't burned down, we could have seen a beautiful landscape like Mont Saint-Michel."

After securing the oar, Saki sat in the boat, opened the lid of the basket, and proudly took out a bottle of sake. Noticing Inako's gaze, Saki stroked the intricately woven basket and asked, "This?"

"This is a kuzu woven water mouth craft. Isn't it a beautiful pattern? It's popular with foreigners."

While I thought the basket was lovely, what caught my attention even more was the sake packed inside it.

"This one is vodka, and this is Daikokuten's brandy, and tequila. It's all my favorite drinks."

After explaining the characteristics of each distilled liquor to Inako, Saki poured whiskey into a small glass and naturally handed it to Inako. Inako, smelling the aroma from the glass, widened her eyes.

“Unlike yesterday's whiskey, this one doesn't have a smoky smell. It has a sweet aroma like burnt sugar.”

“Isn't it interesting? The flavor changes depending on the ingredients and combinations. You really have a good nose.”

Having a good nose might be because I often got to taste-test when I used to visit the sake brewery. When I told Saki this, she nodded enthusiastically and said, “Inako-chan likes sake breweries, huh?”

Inako downed the whiskey in one gulp and lay back, staring up at the sky.

Only white clouds floated in the blue sky. It was cool on the boat, and the sounds of the swaying reeds, birds chirping, and water splashing against the boat blended into a gentle music, providing a pleasant rocking sensation.

“Hey, aren't you with Kihachi-kun today?” Saki asked while drinking the poured liquor.

“...I don't know that mean person. He always teases me.”

“I wonder why Kihachi-kun teases Inako-chan.”

“It's probably because he doesn't like me.”

“People really don’t want to engage with those they truly dislike,” Saki chuckled.

“The reason I act mean is because I want to get the other person's attention.”

When Inako got up, Saki had a mischievous look in her eyes and was smiling.

“Have you started to dislike Kihachi-kun?”

Inako shook her head and said, “No, I haven’t.”

“To be honest, I didn’t want to be disliked.”

While talking about this morning's fight , Inako buried her face in her knees.

The face of Kihachi floated behind her closed eyelids . Memories of when she embarrassed herself asking about Santakuro and Kihachi's face when he was suffering from a cold came to mind, one after another, showing how he had been hurt because of her.

“I couldn’t bear to see Kihachi-san get hurt any more because of me. I was scared that I would keep being a nuisance and eventually he would dislike me too.”

“So you tried to push Kihachi-kun away without even having a proper discussion, unilaterally.”

She looked up at the sharp words. Saki was still smiling, but her eyes were not laughing.

“Clumsy humility and hesitation are an insult to those who trust you.”

Faced with the merciless words, Inako reflexively blurted out, “Isn’t that the only thing we can do?”

“I only have the ability to believe. What am I supposed to be confident about?”

“Believing is your only strength,” Saki said with a laugh that seemed devoid of amusement.

“But you don’t trust Kihachi at all, do you?”

It felt like being pushed into a deep hole. The unexpected words made her heart shrink.

“You don’t want to hurt your own heart, right? Living in a way that doesn’t make anyone dislike you is just relying on others’ strength; you just want to protect yourself the most.”

It felt like being shown a mirror reflecting her ugly self, and Inako wanted to cover her ears.

“If you hesitate and step back, you secretly hope that someone who sympathizes with you will come to help.”

No, no. But no matter how much she denied it, the sharp words were digging out the heart she had hidden.

“Is Inako-chan afraid of relying on others?”

With a relaxed expression, Saki turned her gentle eyes towards me, filled with compassion. It was the same look my mother used to have.

“...I'm scared. Even if I rely on others, we have nothing to give back.”

Inako curled up tightly, clasping her knees.

“I want to be like Mr. Stewart.”

“Mr. Stewart?” Saki looked puzzled.

“He's my idol. I want to be someone who can be relied upon like that, someone who can do something for others.”

Saki laughed with a high-pitched voice. Her cheerful laughter was absorbed by the blue sky.

“Mr. Stewart is the one who relies on others all the time. After losing his teaching job, he seemed to have survived on what others gave him until he started his current job in architecture.”

As I stared in surprise, Saki said, “Let's move to another place,” and she began to row the boat.

When we docked at Benten Island and stepped off, there was a hall right in front of us.

“It’s nostalgic. Back in the day, every time I visited my relatives' house, we would float boats around here and eat kashiwa no junjun together. That was the most delicious hot pot I’ve ever had.”

“What is that pole that juts out into the lake over there?”

“That’s a diving pole. Local kids jump off there to test their courage.”

As she walked through the shrine grounds and eventually reached the base of the pole, Saki began to walk on top of it without hesitation . Despite having been drinking distilled spirits like water, her steps remained steady with her arms held horizontally.

“When I was a child, I was scared to jump off, and my cowardly brother and I were always teased by our cousins.”

Saki laughed heartily and jumped up and down on the pole.

“When I was around Inako-chan’s age, I went to Vancouver, Canada with my relatives. I thought that moving to a new place might change my cowardly nature. But even after changing my living environment, my personality remained the same. Prejudice, poverty, and the hardships of living in an unfamiliar place made me always live in fear , not knowing what I was living for.”

It was Mr. Stewart who saved me. Inspired by the overseas missionary movement, he came to Japan as a teacher and met me at a church in Vancouver where he stopped on his way. The words he gave me at that time... I felt like new seeds were sownka in my withered heart.”

Saki gazed dreamily at the sky, reminiscing about that distant encounter.

“I made a vow then. ‘If he ever has trouble in the future, I will help him this time. I will earn enough money to be able to help him.’ Now, I think I could even jump off the diving pole.”

With a beaming smile, Saki waved her hand towards Inako.

“Step forward. It’s much more enjoyable than you think.”

Standing at the base of the pole, Inako looked down at her feet. The water surface was probably twice her height. When she lifted her face, Inako—likely surprising Saki—smiled proudly and lightly walked along the pole to Saki's side.

“I’m fine. I fell from a much higher place yesterday.”

Saki widened her eyes and then showed her white teeth, saying, “That’s true.”

“Hey, I think we can definitely become wonderful friends.”

Sitting pole, Saki began to line up the sake bottles she had taken out from the basket.

“Please tell me about the adventures you’ve had so far.”

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“Seiroku-kun was my student.”

Stewart, with his hands clasped on the table, relaxed his cheeks nostalgically.

“It was about ten years ago. At that time, there was a commercial school in Otsu. Seiroku-kun always made jokes during class to liven things up. As a newly appointed English teacher, I was quite troubled by him.”

Stewart, who suddenly mentioned my brother's name, left Kihachi feeling half in doubt.

“I heard about Kihachi-kun, but since it was a long time ago, I forgot the name,”

Stewart asked, “Kihachi-kun is certainly obsessed with electricity, right?”

“The twentieth century is the century of electricity.”

Kihachi's disjointed words made Stewart lower his eyebrows and smile wryly.

“If electricity develops, people's lives will improve even more. What benefit is there in believing someone's made-up story and praying to God? The light that will illuminate this country from now on is not from God, but from electric lights .”

Stewart rested his chin on his hand and rhythmically tapped the table with his fingers. Eventually, he clasped his still fingers and faced Kihachi directly again.

“Do you know why I am not in a teaching position now, Kihachi-kun?”

“Is it because being a pastor or in architecture is more profitable ?”

“Actually, I was dismissed by the school.”

To the answer he never expected, Kihachi gasped in .

“I moved here from Otsu due to the relocation of the business school, but this place has deep roots in traditional religion. Even so, I continued to sow of a new god, and just when I thought those seeds had begun to sprout, my evangelistic activities at the school were called into question, and ultimately, I was dismissed.”

“If you have no money, how did you manage to buy that magnificent ship?”

“A friend from America, who supports my missionary work, provided it free of charge. This house was also built thanks to a donation from a friend who suggested, ‘If you’re going to promote architecture, you need a model.’ I’m embarrassed to say that I’ve been relying on others for help.”

“...Why do you continue to evangelize to such an extent?”

“Because it is the mission given to me by God.”

Stewart lifted his cup of coffee, which still had some left.

“A person’s life is like savoring coffee. When you’re a child, if you find it bitter, there’s no need to force it into your mouth. However, as an adult, even if it tastes bad, you can’t just stop drinking it. Society is watching.”

He then gulped down the remaining coffee, which had likely gone completely cold.

“A nation is the same. The young country of Japan, which just opened up fifty years ago, has been struggling to understand the Western flavors it has never tasted before. But if it’s only bitter, it’s tough. Sometimes, sugar is necessary. God is like a spoonful of sugar that softens the bitterness.”

Kihachi looked down at the coffee. A deeply troubled face was reflected on the pitch-black surface of the water.

“When I first came here, I was anxious. Would they really accept someone like me, an outsider? However, the people I interacted with, despite their poverty, were overflowing with compassion for others. Gradually, I began to think that perhaps I could create the Kingdom of God here.”

“The Kingdom of God”

“When you hear ‘the Kingdom of God,’ you might envision a world where one pledges obedience to the Lord, but that is not the case. In fact, the Bible does not specifically describe what the Kingdom of God is like. However, for me, the Kingdom of God is a society where we love our neighbors, hold hands, and pray for peace.”

Stewart spoke with a resolute will in his eyes.

“To be an instrument of the Lord and to build the Kingdom of God here. That is the mission given to me by the Lord.”

“Mission or whatever... that’s just a misconception. Only people can save other people.”

“Kihachi, do you have a flashlight ”

Kihachi, with his eyes wide , hesitantly took out the flashlight, and Stewart nodded slightly in agreement .

“We are the machines of God. Only when we are given the invisible power of God can we become His hands and feet and fulfill our roles. That flashlight, no matter how excellent its power, will not work without electricity. Whether it is God or electricity is not important. Even if one has only a small power, it is those moved by such invisible ‘something’ who save others.”

“Are you really going to attribute mere coincidences or your own choices to the workings of a God whose existence is uncertain?”

“I believe that it is impossible for God not to exist. The world we live in now is built upon countless miracles, and it is hard to think of it as a mere product of chance. It makes more sense to consider that God's will has been at work for us.”

And I weave words as if to tell myself spin .

"Even if there is no God, it is a fact that I was moved by the words of the Bible and the saints."

"...No, everyone is just being skillfully led."

It was already a childish rebuttal, but Stewart gently smiled .

"Becoming an adult is not always a good thing. By the time you can taste coffee, you have already acquired cunning . However, you can still honestly say that something bitter is bitter. That's fine for now."

The pretense of endurance had long been seen through. Suddenly feeling embarrassed after having my childish side exposed.

"...It seems that Seiroku-kun, when he was in commercial school, was also struggling like you are now, Kihachi-kun."

Once again, Stewart mentioned Seiroku's name, and Kihachi weakly lifted his face.

"One of my attempts back then was a Bible class. After school, it was a class to teach the Bible while studying English for those who were interested, and Seiroku-kun was present in the first class."

"My brother? He must have come to mock me, saying there is no God," Kihachi sneered.

“I thought it was rare, so I tried to talk to him, and he asked me seriously,”

—“What kind of place is the Kingdom of God in Christianity?”

Kiha's chuckle disappeared. Was it like a bolt from the blue thunder

“After that, Seiroku-kun participated every time without fail. He was so enthusiastic that he competed for first and second place in class, and I received many questions about passages related to the Kingdom of God, such as those in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke.”

Stewart held a flashlight in his hand and said, “This was originally mine.”

“I was the one who taught Seiroku-kun about Santa Claus. Then he begged me to sell him my old flashlight, saying, ‘I need it for my brother who is afraid of the dark.’”

While surprised by the flashlight story, Kiha gritted his teeth and said, “...Why do you act like it’s someone else's business?”

“It happened because of you, brother. You only thought about your own convenience.”

“No, he always cared about you, Kiha-kun. That’s why even though he studied Christianity, he never wanted to get baptized. He said, ‘If I go to heaven alone, I’ll be separated from my family who goes to paradise.’”

——“I can’t believe in something like paradise that I can’t see.”

Recalling the words once said by Seiryu, he spat out, "What the hell is that?" Was he secretly believing in the afterlife? Enough with the teasing, Kihachi scratched his head in frustration.

“There’s no way my brother believed in paradise. He always laughed at my prophecies.”

“《No. 17 Electric Equipment》……to assist the weakened human muscles with electricity.”

At that moment, an utterly unbelievable word escaped from Stewart's mouth, and Kihachi doubted his ears.

“《No. 18 Restoration Electric Communication》……to send thoughts converted into electrical signals, facilitating communication with the other party without misunderstanding.”

Dazed and lost, Kihachi heard Stewart, who had finished speaking the prophecy, lower his eyebrows.

“It was the electric catalog, wasn’t it? Actually, I have read its contents. Every prophecy was filled with love for humanity. As I expected, you are like ice cream. … You can see things calmly and possess a gentle sweetness that cares for others. That’s why God entrusted you with the mission of ‘creating paradise with electricity.’”

In a confused state, I barely managed to retort, “Please stop using the word mission.”

“No, God has guided you here to fulfill that mission. Why did I know the contents of the electric catalog? I will show you the reason.”

Suddenly, Stewart stood up, left the living room, entered the adjacent study, and returned after a while, holding a small furoshiki bundle.

“Please, take a look.”

What was placed on the table was a long, rectangular furoshiki wrap.

As I traced the familiar shape with my gaze, I thought, no way.

Reaching out with trembling hands, I grasp the furoshiki bundle. I recognize this weight. No way, could it be?

While repeatedly wishing that it couldn't be so, I untied the knot. Slowly, I peeled back each layer of the wrapping cloth, and finally, after taking a deep breath, I forcefully removed it.

With a voice mixed with "Ah" and a scream of lament, Kihachi scrunched up his face.

The exposed folded book has burnt , and the corners are worn and rounded.

Nevertheless, the characters "Seiroku" written on the cover of the "Electrical Catalog" remained strong.

“...Did you receive this from your brother?”

No, unfortunately, that is not the case.

Stewart shook his head and pointed to the corner of the cover, saying, "Do you see this hole?"

In the corner of the cover, there was a small hole that I didn't recognize piercing . When I opened the cover, it had penetrated several sheets of paper inside.

“This is a bullet mark.”

Stewart said calmly, and Kihachi felt a chill run down his spine.

“During the Russo-Japanese War, this book was on the battlefield. I don’t know why it was in such a place or how it got a bullet mark. The person who brought this catalog to me after the war felt a great sin regarding it. Unable to bear the weight of that sin, they entrusted it to me.”

“Sin... who exactly is that person?”

“I cannot tell you who they are at this time. Until today, I did not know who the original owner of this catalog was. However, now that I know you are the owner, I have decided it should be returned to you.”

“...Is it really okay for such a convenient thing to happen? Such coincidences piling up like this.”

“It is not a coincidence. God has guided you so that you can fulfill your mission. As Kihachi thought for himself, started walking, and jumped off the train, he met me. The will and actions that drew this seemingly too perfect connection prepared by God are yours.”

As he murmured “connection,” Kihachi turned the cover. With each turn of the pages, from the first to the second page , he felt a nostalgic lump in his throat until he reached the nineteenth page. This is where Kihachi had written up to.

Kihachi slowly turned to the next page.

“Twentieth: Electric Nishiki ”

The last page of the prophecy page . There, a prophecy I had no recollection of was written in Seiroku's characters.

Could this be the secret liquor in question? However, next to it, there was only a line that read, "Bitter and spicy, just like electricity as ." Is it really okay to hand this over to Yosuke?

Kihachi read the electrical catalog over and over again. Even the prophecies I had forgotten until now were carefully explained in clumsy characters, and as my memories revived , my heart felt a little ticklish.

After quite a long time, I started to feel a bit hungry. Just as if he had been waiting for that moment, Stewart brought a plate with sliced Detchi and said, "Please help yourself if you'd like." Kihachi, though hesitant, took a piece of yokan on a toothpick and put it in his mouth.

Unlike the square yokan famous in Fushimi, the Detchi yokan originating from Hachiman has a flat shape. While savoring its simple sweetness, I thought that the next time I tease Inako about her physique, I would compare her to the Detchi yokan.

I can easily imagine Inako puffing her cheeks and saying, "I'm not that flat."

That's right, I finally got my hands on the electrical catalog.

No matter the contents or circumstances, if I hand this over to Yosuke, Inako will finally be free.

"That grasshopper, if he sees this catalog, he'll be surprised."

"Kihachi-kun, why are you so concerned about Inako-chan?"

Kiha was taken aback by Stewart's question.

“All of a sudden, why...?”

Though he mumbled, Kihachi resigned himself when he was gazed at by Stewart's pure and innocent eyes.

“Locusts show various faces. They squint in disbelief, tremble , get angry, cry, and wear serious expressions. And sometimes... they laugh heartily. Watching them clears the heart, brings joy, and makes you want to see them again. That’s the kind of smile they have.”

Even though he was saying something ridiculous, Stewart listened with a serious face.

“That’s the cutest face of his, but it rarely shows. So, I want to make sure he can always wear his best face.”

A noise came from behind.

When he turned around casually, Inako was standing at the entrance of the living room, and Kihachi froze.

“...Since when have you been there?”

“Since Stewart's first question,” Saki, who was nearby, said with a playful smile.

Kihachi's body was suddenly heated, and hot blood rushed to his head. Meanwhile, Inako was trembling with a complex expression of confusion, tears, and surprise.

“I went sightseeing with Inako . We’ve become good friends.”

Blushing, Saki opened the lid of the basket. It was filled with Western liquor, and it looked like everything was empty. An astonished Stewart muttered, “I told you that children shouldn’t drink…”

“It was so much fun… and Inako’s red face isn’t because of the alcohol, right?”

In response to the teasing remark, Inako covered her cheeks and dashed outside.

While I was dumbfounded, Saki scolded me, saying, “What are you doing, Kihachi? Go after her!”

Even though I thought, “Whose fault is this?” I stood up from my chair. Just as I was about to pass by, Saki called out, “Oh, right!”

“I left something on the boat, could you please get it for me? Inako knows where it is. Thanks in advance!”

It was dusk outside, and the shadows of the buildings had grown quite long. Looking around the street, I easily spotted a familiar short-haired figure. I immediately followed, but compared to my geta, her Western shoes were fast. I couldn’t catch up.

Still, as I managed to close the distance, I called out, “Inako!”

As I was catching my breath, Inako turned around. Her neatly trimmed hair swayed, and her glass-like eyes sparkled in the sunset, with thin tears streaming down her cheeks.

To his surprise, he didn't expect her to be crying, and Kihachi became flustered.

“Did I say something terrible again?”

Inako wiped her tears with her fingertips while trying to explain, “No, no, that’s not it.”

“I don’t really understand either. I don’t know, but it’s not sadness.”

“It’s nothing,” Inako said, lifting her tear-streaked face and smiling.

Not wanting to just stand there in the middle of the street, the two decided to go retrieve Saki’s forgotten item. However, even after arriving at the boat with Inako’s guidance, they couldn’t find anything that resembled it.

As she pouted, feeling that it was a waste to have come all this way, a mischievous thought arose in Kihachi’s mind.

“Shall I move this boat a little?”

“Huh, is that okay?” Inako, feeling anxious, was seated in the boat, and Kihachi skillfully took the oars and pushed away from the shore. Suddenly, Inako’s face brightened as she exclaimed, “Wow, it’s moving so smoothly!”

“I learned it well from my older brother. I never thought it would come in handy in a place like this.”

After rowing for a while in the inner lake, they saw the rice ears swaying in the wind above the lake.

“That rice field. It's on the lake, and you can only get there by boat. I wonder what kind of taste the sake made from that rice would have.”

Inako, who had been gazing at the rice field intently, looked up as if she remembered something.

“Do you know the saying, ‘A year with many thunderstorms means a good harvest’? You might think it's just a superstition.”

Kihachi said, “No, not really.”

“I've heard that the discharge from lightning changes nitrogen in the air into nutrients, and that seeps into the ground to help crops grow well . There’s something similar in an article called ‘Prophecies of the Twentieth Century’.”

“Is that so?” Inako said, surprised, leaning against the edge of the boat.

“A time will come when crops can be grown with electricity.”

“The twentieth century is the age of electricity, after all.”

Having said that, Kihachi realized he had forgotten to mention the most important thing.

“Oh, right, it’s finally been found.”

He thrust the electrical catalog he had taken from his pocket in front of Inako, who asked, "What is it?"

Inako, who understood the situation, exclaimed, "Huh, is this the catalog? Why?" in a fluster. When Kihachi explained, Inako let out a deep sigh as if to release everything she had been holding back.

"With this, the marriage to that centipede man will be off."

Inako, smirking, traced her finger over the hole on the cover, saying, "What is this hole?"

"It seems to be a bullet mark," Kihachi replied, causing Inako's face to freeze.

"It looks like this catalog was taken to the war. Maybe my brother took it."

Inako traced the bullet mark with her finger as if to care it.

"Did he take it as a good luck charm?"

Inako said quietly, and Kihachi shrugged.

"Would he do something so sentimental? He probably took it just to laugh and kill time."

"Really, you just keep doubting everything."

“I don’t believe in things I can’t see,” he laughed, and Inako burst out, “I know.”

After the two of them laughed for a while, Inako suddenly had a lonely expression.

“Kihachi, can you really not believe in God?”

“...Ever since my brother died, I haven’t been able to believe in gods or Buddhas.”

Kihachi held a paddle with a pained expression and looked down .

“The more I chant sutras, the more I pass under the torii gate, the more the existence of the afterlife becomes questionable, and I feel like God is disappearing from within me.”

Even while chanting nenbutsu and norito , there were times since childhood when it felt like I was speaking into a phonograph that wasn’t playing a wax cylinder .

Still, I believed that my voice must be reaching somewhere, but when the shrine that never opened finally opened and Seiroku died, my faith shattered like a burnt-out light bulb.

“Doubting is exhausting. If you doubt even once, you can never truly believe in God again. Believing may be a foolish act, but... there’s nothing as difficult and precious as this.”

As I moved the paddle in my hand, the waves made a small sound.

“If I could just continue to believe in God, how easy it would be. If I could honestly believe that there is paradise after death, how happy I would be. Even if I want to believe, I just… I just can’t believe in something I can’t see.”

The tower, under the force, struck the water's surface. The sky beyond Mount Chomeiji changed from red to blue.

Gradually, the darkness deepened. Soon, the night would come when nothing could be seen.

Looking quietly, Inako stood up and firmly grasped Kihachi's sleeves.

"I will become a god."

Inako's eyes, shining like jewels, pierced straight through Kihachi, making his heart leap.

"I will become your god, Kihachi."

"What do you mean——"

"You've never made a wish to a god before, have you? If you show me... the real Mount Fuji that I want to see, I will become a substitute for the god and grant you one wish. I will prove that gods exist."

The wind blew through, and Inako's short, thin hair fluttered.

"If it's about me, it should be visible."

Inako said that and laughed heartily.

As soon as I saw her smile, which shone brighter than a lantern , a lamp, or the light of a gas lamp, the surrounding sounds vanished for that brief moment, my heart pounded strongly, and my whole body went numb and couldn't move.

It was the first experience of its kind. Kihachi clearly realized the change that had occurred within him.

“Yes,” Inako said, extending her pinky finger.

“...What is it, a pinky promise?”

“A promise with me.”

Kihachi cleared his throat and intertwined his pinky finger, leaving warmth on his cheek.

“I will definitely show Inako Mount Fuji someday.”

After making the pinky promise, Inako wore a faint smile .

“Finally, you called my name.”

“Ah,” suddenly feeling embarrassed, Kihachi pouted his lips.

“Was it better to have Koyadofu-chan?”

“Inago is fine.”

Inago slowly shook her head.

“Inago is fine.”

Before the night deepened, they hurried off the boat and returned to Stewart's house, where the sounds of organ music and laughter could be heard from inside. In the lamp-lit living room, many young people were chatting and playing the violin along with Stewart's organ, creating a lively atmosphere. Saki, holding a bottle of liquor, told me, “Stewart's students have come together.”

“More importantly, Inago-chan, you have a visitor.”

Saki pointed to a girl wearing a white kasuri with her back turned to us. The red ribbon tying her hair caught Kihachi's eye. Perhaps noticing us, she turned around, wafting a mysterious pleasant scent through , and with a graceful smile, said, “You look well, Inago,” as Noriko smiled at her.

“Sister? What are you doing here?” Inago exclaimed in surprise.

“I read the newspaper. It said you tried to commit double suicide.”

Kihachi and Inago simultaneously grimaced. It seemed that the situation was more serious than they had thought it was .

“But how did you know about this place?”

“When Mr. Riku was at the commercial school, we sometimes attended Bible class together, so I became close with Mr. Stewart. I heard that he was saved by a Western ship, and I thought maybe...”

“Did Noriko come to bring back Inako?”

“I wouldn’t do something so rude. I came to check on her because I was worried.”

“That’s right, sis, listen!”

Excited, Inako held up the electric catalog she received from Kihachi displaying .

“If I give this book to Dr. Paikal, the marriage will be canceled. I finally got it!”

Noriko, surprised by Inako’s joy, widened her eyes at the “electric catalog.” Although it was undeniable that the explanation was lacking, Noriko, who had been frozen, eventually smiled and pinched Inako’s cheek playfully.

“That’s great, now you can relax.”

As the three of them were standing , Stewart, who had just finished playing, turned around.

“Do you have any song requests?”

In response to the abrupt question, Kihachi answered, "I don't, but..." while Inako shyly raised her hand.

"I want to hear the Salvation Army song, 'Kohai dōhō '."

Perhaps unable to understand, Stewart smiled wryly and tilted his head to the side .

"Isn't it about 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'?"

When Saki offered a helping hand, Stewart nodded, "Ah," nodding , and immediately began to play .

"Oh, was this originally a foreign song?"

In response to Noriko's question, Saki answered while holding a sake bottle.

"It's an American song. In Japanese, I think it's called 'Republic Song'."

"Everyone, please sing."

"I don't know the English lyrics," Inako said, looking puzzled.

“Then please sing with the lyrics that Inako-chan likes.”

Eventually, Inako modestly began to sing, “This is the end of our comrades──,” and Noriko followed suit. Kihachi borrowed a book with the lyrics and started singing in English to match those around him.

Inako and Saki took each other's hands and danced , while Kihachi stood next to the man playing the violin, swaying his shoulders and singing loudly, with Noriko clapping her hands and laughing.

The language and the dance were inconsistent , but it was extraordinarily delightful. While singing, Kihachi thought that if he could dance with people from all over the world like this, world peace might actually be surprisingly easy to achieve.

“Let’s take a short break,” Stewart said, coming over while showing concern , and Kihachi looked around, feeling a twinge of regret at the sight of the people chatting amicably.

“I wish I had brought a phonograph. I wanted to record this atmosphere, even just a little.”

“Record? I don’t have a phonograph, but there are other means.”

When Stewart appeared with a camera, Inako froze. While her students lined up and smiled for the photo, Inako trembled, hiding behind Kihachi. Then, when Stewart pointed the camera at Kihachi, Inako’s face turned pale, and Noriko looked on in disbelief.

“Inako has always run away when it’s time for photos.”

“Inako, it’s okay. If your soul were really to be taken, everyone from earlier would be wiped out.”

After hesitating shunshun , Kihachi silently grabbed Inako's arm and made her stand next to him.

“If you feel like your soul is being pulled out, I’ll pull you back.”

Gently tightening the grip on the arm, I hurriedly turned my face away from Inako, who was looking up at me with a surprised expression.

"I'll hold on tight."

“...Okay, please.”

From Inako, who had slightly leaned closer, the warmth of her arm was transmitted through the fabric. Just as I started to feel restless, the shutter was closed.

*

Among my students, there was a man who had been sitting in a chair the whole time. When Stewart asked, it seemed he had sprained his ankle the other day and couldn't move too vigorously.

"Shall we try using an electric therapy device? I'll bring it."

As Stewart went inside, Inako asked Kihachi, "What's an electric therapy device?"

"It's an electric massage device. It stimulates the affected area with electricity to alleviate symptoms; it used to be called an electric machine."

What Stewart brought was a wooden box that looked like a medicine cabinet. When he opened the lid, a complex circuit connecting a coiled wire and metal pieces was exposed. As Stewart connected the battery to the box's wires, the metal pieces began to tap on the tube, making a sound like a telegraph.

Inako, surprised that the metal was moving on its own, was explained by Kihachi, "It's an electromagnet."

"It's not an ordinary magnet; it's a magnet that only has magnetic force when electricity flows. When electricity flows, this coil wrapped around a wire becomes an electromagnet, and it attracts iron pieces with its magnetic force. Conversely, when electricity stops flowing, the magnetic force disappears, and the iron pieces detach. This action is now being repeated at high speed."

To obtain the alternating current needed for high voltage used in electrical therapy, Kihachi spoke passionately, and Inako, while nodding in agreement , soon gave up on understanding it completely.

"It's amazing that something that wasn't a magnet becomes a magnet through the power of electricity…"

As I was captivated by the movement of the electromagnet, a student who had a part called a lead that stretched like a kite from the box said, "It seems like electricity isn't flowing."

Kihachi, quickly sensing something was wrong, exclaimed, "Is there a problem?" and, with a joyful demeanor, jumped to the electrical therapy device, starting to fiddle with

its insides without waiting for a response.

“The circuit that generates alternating current is working, so there seems to be a problem with the induction coil.”

Eventually, when Kihachi found a broken wire and borrowed tools from Stewart to reconnect it, electricity flowed from the lead, and the student sighed in relief, saying, “That’s great.”

“To understand electrical circuits at your age is quite impressive.”

As the impressed students looked on, Stewart patted Kihachi on the shoulder and said, “Kihachi-kun is said to create paradise with electricity in the future,” to which Kihachi smiled slyly, seemingly pleased.

“I’m looking forward to the future. I need to study a lot from now on,” the students surrounded Kihachi, chatting amicably about their dreams, while Inako felt a weight settling in her chest.

“Oh, it's already this time. I have to go home.”

“Saki looked at her wristwatch and said. After greeting Stuart and the others, Saki decided to accompany Inako, who said, ‘Oh, I’ll see you off.’”

“It’s been a while since I had such a delightful day.”

“As they walked down the street at night, with light spilling from the townhouses, Saki said.”

“By the way, I wonder if Inako-chan wanted to breathe some fresh air?”

“Do you understand?” Inako, feeling as if her heart was seen through , stuck out her tongue and blushed.

“I thought it was enviable how Kihachi-san is focused on what he wants to do without looking elsewhere. Compared to that, I feel like I don’t have anything like that... Kihachi-san said, ‘You just haven’t found the meaning of living yet...’”

“There’s a saying, ‘It’s dark under the lighthouse,’” Saki smiled .

“What Inako-chan is looking for might be surprisingly close, and she just hasn’t noticed it.”

“Is that so?” Inako sighed, and Saki patted her back, saying, “Don’t be anxious.”

“It would be great if you could find it together with Kihachi-kun.”

In the midst of the townhouses, there is a mansion with a large pine tree growing inside the wooden fence, and Saki stopped and stretched up, saying, "This is my relative's house."

"Well, I have to work hard too."

"By the way, I heard that you are a businesswoman, Saki."

"Yes. I have an important business meeting in Ise soon."

"Ise, huh? That sounds nice. I want to visit there someday too."

"Oh, you can come anytime. My home is in Matsusaka, so I can show you around."

As soon as she heard Matsusaka, Inako felt a sense of familiarity.

It was the same at Lake Nanko today. There was something familiar about Saki's story.

Omi relatives, Vancouver, and Matsusaka.

"Um... by the way, what was your last name, Saki?"

When Saki clapped her hands and said "Ah," she cleared her throat in a theatrical manner.

“ Mitsuzoe , let me introduce myself, I am Mitsuzoe Saki.”

Saki laughed jokingly. Her smile always brightened Inako. However, Inako could not purely accept that smile now, as if it were just a few minutes ago.

“...Is Yosuke Mitsuzoe a relative of yours, Saki-san?”

“Yes, Yosuke is my brother.”

He wanted to curse himself for being so foolish. The story he heard from Yosuke at the restaurant in Otsu and the story Saki told him at the inner lake were almost the same.

Does Saki know about him and Yosuke? Is Saki hiding something from him?

“Inako-chan, how do you know my brother?”

In Saki's cheerful smile , the shadow of Yosuke flickered.

“...He became the branch manager of the Fushimi branch, so we met.”

When he answered tactfully , Saki blandly nodded and said, “Oh, that’s right.”

“Well then, Inako-chan, if you ever come to Matsusaka again, please contact me.”

Saki waved her hand lightly and disappeared into the mansion. I felt a sense of unease, but there was no point in thinking about it. Anyway, if I could just hand the electrical catalog to Yosuke, everything would work out.

I should hurry back to Kihachi. Just as I was about to turn around,

“Oh, is that you, Inako-chan?” a sticky male voice came from the darkness.

A chill ran through my body, and I stood frozen in place as Yosuke's faint smile emerged from the darkness, ominously illuminated by the weak light leaking from the town house.

“I never expected to run into you here. What on earth are you doing here?”

“...I was meeting with Saki.”

At the mention of Saki's name, Yosuke's face darkened as he asked, “Did you meet with your sister?”

“I thought I’d stop by to greet my relatives, but I really don’t want to face her. ...By the way, did you find the electrical catalog?”

“Y-yes, I found it.”

“Is that true?” Yosuke said, lowering his eyes for a moment, but perhaps feeling distrust due to Inako's timid attitude, he furrowed his brows and said, “That seems suspicious. Are you planning to say something vague and run away again?”

“Kihachi has it. I will show you now.”

As Inako was about to leave, Yosuke put his hand on his chin .

“Well, I heard a rather interesting story. It's about Kihachi.”

Yosuke, with a sneaky , stopped Inako in her tracks.

*

In the quiet living room after the students had left, Kihachi was sitting in a chair, opening the electrical catalog when Rikiko peeked in from behind, asking, “Can I see it too?” Her long hair brushed against Kihachi's cheek.

“No, but this is just some doodles from when I was a kid.”

Feeling embarrassed about being read by a woman like Rikiko, Kihachi hesitated, but Rikiko lightly wrapped her arm around Kihachi's neck from behind, and in surprise, he lost hold of the electrical catalog.

With a defiant smile, Rikiko said, “Just a little bit,” while Kihachi felt a flutter of nervousness inside.

Rikiko, with her slender fingers tracing the cover, noticed “this hole” in the corner that had been boreddrilled.

“It seems to be a bullet hole. I don't know the details, but it looks like it’s from the Russo-Japanese War.”

“...I see,” Noriko flipped through the pages .

In the quiet room, the clock ticked, and Noriko looked up at the wall clock.

“Inako, aren’t you taking a long time to come back?”

Kihachi instinctively stood up. Seeing this, Noriko smiled and said, “You’re worried, aren’t you?”

“I’m sorry, but could you go pick up Inako? She might be lost.”

It was a plausible story. Kihachi picked up a lamp from the living room and went outside.

Relying on the lights of houses and lamps, he walked down the night street, sweat dripping from his forehead.

After a while, he saw a familiar figure disappearing down the road leading to Hachiman station.

“Inako!”

As he left the town and entered a dark road, Kihachi called out ahead, and a shadow hesitated in the darkness. As he approached, breathless, the lamp's light illuminated Inako's figure.

“Where are you going? That way is Yahata Station.”

As I tried to pull my arm back and return the way I came, Inako stood there, motionless.

“Inako?”

“I’ve always wanted to thank Kihachi-san.”

“What’s with the suddenness?”

“ Suisui boats, Lake Biwa, and Omi Fuji, along with clothes, shoes, and an organ. Thanks to Kihachi-san, I’ve learned so many things I didn’t know before. Really, thank you very much.”

“It’s too early for thanks. We can’t let our guard down until I hand over the electrical catalog.”

Then, Inako placed her small hand on the arm holding the lamp and slowly leaned her face closer.

With her heart racing like a drum, Kihachi looked at Inako, who wore a gentle smile.

“So, take care of yourself.”

Whisper ing, Inako blew over the Hoya and extinguished the lamp's light.

The world went completely dark. Suddenly, it became hard to breathe, and sweat poured from my forehead.

“Inako—?”

There was no response, and the sound of footsteps quickly faded away from the scene.

Before I could even think about why, my limbs went numb and I couldn't move, and Kihachi collapsed on the spot.

Once again, I was left behind in the darkness. An indescribable fear surged over me, but my limbs wouldn't move.

“Why?” the voice that whispered was drowned out by the chorus of frogs and the sound of rice ears swaying.

As my consciousness became vague and my sense of time began to numb , someone ran towards me.

I heard the sound of a match being struck and lit. As Kihachi slightly opened his eyes, the light of the lamp illuminated his face. Once my eyes adjusted to the light, the face of Riku looking down at me became clear.

“...Who are you...?”

“I’ve been searching for you. I never thought you would be in Hachiman town.”

As Kihachi staggered to his feet, he took the lamp and started walking toward the station.

“Wait, where are you going?” Riku grabs my shoulder.

“I have to chase after Inako…”

“If it’s Inako-kun, he just went back by train with Yosuke-san, who was at Yahata Station earlier.”

At the sudden mention of Yosuke, my heart froze.

“Then I have to chase after him even more…!”

I try to start walking, but Riku doesn’t let go of my shoulder.

“Please let go. He might have put himself in a weird situation again.”

Didn’t we find the electric catalog? Didn’t we make a pinky promise?

We promised that if we showed Inako Mount Fuji, the gods would grant our wishes.

“He wouldn’t break a promise like that. He’s not like my brother, who just lied all the time!”

Riku grabbed Kihachi by the collar and looked down at him with a fury expression.

“Even if you are my brother, I won’t allow you to insult my best friend!”

Kihachi froze in place at Riku's fierce demeanor. Their hands released from each other, and their heavy breaths echoed in the rice field.

“I was in commercial school with that guy.”

“...I didn’t know that. I never heard it from my brother.”

“I often heard about you from him. About you and your electrical catalog.”

Kihachi's heart, which had begun to calm down, was suddenly shaken.

“That electrical catalog has been found,” Kihachi said quickly.

“What did you say?”

“In any case, if we hand the catalog to Dr. Paikal, Inako will be saved.”

As Kihachi dashed out, Riku chased after him, saying, "Wait a moment."

Running through the streets with the flickering light of the lamp, I returned to Stewart's house. However, there was no sign of Noriko, who should have been reading the electrical catalog just a moment ago.

“Kihachi-kun, why are you in such a hurry? ... Oh, Riku-kun?”

Riku, peeking out from the kitchen, bowed his head politely .

“Mr. Stewart, where is Noriko?”

Stewart blinked in surprise at Kihachi's urgent question.

“As for Noriko, she said, ‘I will go look for my sister too,’ and left just a moment ago.”

*

── Noriko is a reliable child, so she should be fine.

Since childhood, I had been raised with such words around me.

Both my father and the maid, as well as relatives, valued Noriko as a “child who doesn’t cause trouble,” while at the same time, there was a prevailing attitude that did not allow Noriko to act spoiled drifting .

However, the only one who truly understood Noriko's nature was my mother Naeko .

──Noriko is actually a crybaby, and her mother knows it well.

If there was something she couldn't do in her lessons, she would secretly get help from Naoko in her room at night, and on days when she felt sad, she would cry on Naoko's chest. For Noriko, Naoko was the only place where she could feel safe and truly express her feelings.

However, Naoko soon became Inako's.

Naoko spent most of her day in the sake brewery. Noriko, who disliked the smell of the brewery, couldn't step inside at all, while Inako would come and go with a carefree expression. Every time she saw Inako happily talking with the kurabito or Naoko from outside the brewery, she felt like she was the only one being excluded .

When Noriko was fourteen, Naoko passed away, and she realized she had lost her place to rely on, so she never cried at the funeral. She acted resolutely, continuing to be the person everyone around her wanted her to be.

She believed that was the only way to survive in this house.

After a while, she went to visit the Inari Shrine for a change of pace. Even though she was trying to act strong, perhaps her heart was tired; she accidentally missed a step on the stone stairs. It was just that small incident, but it was enough to create a hole in the dam of emotions she had been holding back, and tears began to well up in her eyes.

“What’s wrong, did you twist your foot?”

As she sat on the stone steps, trying to hold back her tears, a voice came from above her. Squinting her eyes, she looked up to see a young man in a traditional outfit standing there. He had a slender build, but his eyes were sharp .

“Seiroku-san... what are you doing here?”

“In the store delivery, I was going to deliver candles to that Shiko 's house.”

I first met Kiyoshi in Stewart's Bible class.

While Jinnemon was having business talks and casual conversations at Tsunekichi's store in Otsu, Noriko, who had come along, occasionally visited Stewart's house with Riku and participated in the Bible class.

Stewart's Bible stories were straightforward, but the games using English were fun, and even when there was no business at the store, I insisted on being taken there by the maid.

I was also close to Kiyoshi, but as he teased me and made jokes, I felt a sense of discomfort towards him, especially since I was still an elementary school student. I never expected to meet that guy in a place like this.

"I twisted my ankle, but I'll be able to walk again in a little while, so don't worry about me."

"That's tough. To hurt your foot in a place like this in the mountains. Where were you planning to go?"

"To Gozendani I answered without thinking, then forced a smile.

"You must be in a hurry. If you rest a bit, you'll be able to walk, so don't mind me."

However, Kiyoshi not only didn't leave but also picked Noriko up without giving her a chance to refuse.

"W-wait, put me down!"

Without any pretense, while carrying the struggling Noriko, Seiroku began to climb the stone steps.

“I’m done with my business here. I’ll take you along.”

“In a place like this where people can see us... Please don’t treat me like a child.”

“What’s a child saying?”

“I can manage on my own. Please put me down.”

“See, even when you try to act like an adult, your true self comes out. Children should take advantage of being able to rely on others.”

Feeling as if everything was being seen through, Noriko clenched her teeth. Compared to Riku, the back she was clinging to was much smaller, but surprisingly warm, and Noriko was a bit taken aback.

As promised, after being carried to the shrine at Gozendani and finishing her prayers, she was once again carried on his back and walked along another path, arriving at the shrine of Akubi Daimyojin.

“In my house, we have a shrine that enshrines a spirit of this god. My younger brother prays there diligently.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“It feels wrong to just send a girl who looks like she’s about to cry home like that.”

“Ah, I just twisted my ankle and was teary-eyed.”

“Is that so? To me, you looked like you were about to cry.”

Again, the dam about to overflow. I fell silent and held it back.

“Crying is such a childish thing to do.”

“I think being stubborn is more childish.”

Seiroku turned his face away, deliberately looking at the scenery spread out below.

“Here, if you cry, no one will see you.”

What had been held back by the dam burst easily with Seiroku's mischievous remark.

All emotions fell with the tears, soaking the ground.

“Cry while you can, just let it out.”

While gently stroking Noriko's head, who was sobbing , Seiroku softly murmured.

“When you grow up, you won’t be able to cry so easily.”

Perhaps she cried for about an hour. During that time, Seiroku patiently waited without asking anything.

“...I’m sorry for dragging you into something so embarrassing. You even took me to Gozendani , so please let me thank you next time.”

Seiroku, who said it was no trouble, continued to argue, but eventually, he relented.

“I understand, I understand... But where will we meet next time?”

“Please come here next month. It’s less noticeable here, right?”

When Noriko laughed, Seiroku, who was momentarily dumbfounded , also laughed and replied, “That’s true.”

The following month, when Noriko went to Akubi Daimeijin's mound, Seiroku was waiting for her as promised.

From then on, Noriko made various excuses to meet Seiroku in front of the mound, and they talked about trivial things. They discussed their families, Seiroku's work at the Buddhist goods store, how Kihachi lost the money to attend middle school due to the restoration of Zenshokuji 's main hall, and also about Kihachi's electrical catalog.

“Hey big sister, you sometimes look happy reading letters, but who are they from?”

One day, while reading a letter from Seiroku in my room, Inako came in with wide eyes and asked.

“This is a letter from Akuhiko Daimyojin. It comes when you believe in the gods.”

Even if it was my cute little sister's request, I couldn't tell the truth.

It was a painful lie, but it had an immediate effect on Inako. With her eyes sparkling , she asked, “A letter from the gods?” I reminded her, “It's a secret letter, so you mustn't tell anyone.”

Noriko was still living her days with constant tension, both at home and outside. However, in front of the empty mound, while talking to Seiroku or retorting to his jokes, there was no need to be tense at all. The time spent with Seiroku reminded me of the time spent with Naeko.

However, I also felt a sense of frustration at Seiroku's somewhat sisterly attitude. When I thought about whether there was something I could do for Seiroku, an idea suddenly

flashed into my mind, and I took out a paulownia box from the chest .

Inside the paulownia box was a bundle of papers tied with a string.

As I stared blankly at it, I heard Riku's voice from outside the fusuma saying, “I’m coming in.” When the sullen-faced Riku entered the room, he pointed at the bundle of papers I was holding and asked, “What is that?”

“It's a memorandum about a sake called ‘Denki Nishiki ’.”

Noriko handed the memorandum to Riku. The content seemed to be about the manufacturing method of Denki Nishiki, which Noriko, who was not familiar with the sake brewery's work, could hardly understand.

“Why do you have something like this?”

“I was given this by my mother before she passed away. She said, ‘I couldn’t take care of you much, so I’m giving you my treasure.’ …Honestly, I’m not good with alcohol.”

──She doesn’t express that she wanted to be together, even just a little, more than this.

“But I have to overcome it someday. It’s not proper for the daughter of a sake brewery to be bad with alcohol.”

“If I could do that, I wouldn’t be struggling,” said Riku, retrieving the memorandum .

“Please don’t handle it too roughly. This memorandum was given to me by my mother with instructions to ‘give it to your future husband.’”

Riku paused for a moment and said with a displeased expression, “I’m sorry about that.”

“With that prickly personality, your future husband will have a hard time.”

“No need to worry. I won’t be giving this to you, Riku.”

Naeko stood up and began to prepare to go out, saying, “I’ll take this.”

“Where are you planning to go?”

“This is Inari . Today is the usual day for the monthly visit.”

Leaving the house, I met with Seiroku at the mound of Akubi Daimeijin, and immediately handed over the memorandum for Denki .

“‘Denki Nishiki’... the selling point is, ‘Spicy and sharp, just like electricity itself .”

“Kihachi-kun's catalog isn't even half full, right? Please use that.”

“Even so, I want Kihachi himself to think and come up with the answers.”

As Seiroku tried to return the memorandum, Noriko pushed it back with both hands.

“Then, please copy it into the catalog when you really can't think of anything.”

“It's an important book, right? Is it really okay to take it out?”

Seiroku pushed the memorandum back again.

“If a single book can crush it, then it's just a sake brewery of that level.”

“What a mischievous guy.”

“Stop complaining and just accept my feelings.”

Seiroku, who had been pressed with a memorandum by Noriko, was left dumbfounded, asking, “Feelings?”

“Ah,” Noriko's face turned hot all over.

“I just remembered something, so I’ll take my leave for today. Anyway, I’ll give you that.”

Noriko left Seiroku, who still had a dazed , and ran away from the spot.

──I handed it over, I really did. With each step down the long approach, Noriko's heart pleasantly bounced .

Her breath quickened earlier than usual, and her chest felt warm. Seiroku probably had no idea what was going on. I wonder what kind of face he would make if I explained the meaning of that memorandum next time.

As a strange mix of anxiety and anticipation swelled within her, Noriko enjoyed the feeling of her body lifting like a hot air balloon for a moment.

That feeling was punctured by a single word from Jin'emon a few days later.

"Your marriage partner has been decided. It's Kengo-kun from the Riku store."

In Jinyuemon's room, Noriko was frozen in a formal sitting position. Her vacant eyes were drawn to the movement of the purple smoke rising from Jinyuemon's cigarette .

“You’ve taken care of me since I was little, so you know me well, right?”

It was no joke. I only had memories of almost arguing with Riku, so how could I know him well?

“You have no complaints, do you?”

However, Jinyuemon's eyes had a sharpness like that of a hunter, and Noriko, pierced by his gaze, found herself unable to move. The feeling of being pinned down deflated, and her body felt completely heavy.

In the early summer of Meiji 36 (1903), at a tea shop located at the Inari Shrine's Yotsutsuj , she was eating ice cream served in a bowl alongside Seiroku while gazing at the scenery of Fukakusa below.

“Hey, it’s melting.”

Noriko, lost in thought, hurriedly scooped up the ice cream at Seiroku's words.

“It’s rare to see you so dazed .”

“It might be because of the heat,” Noriko said as she brought the ice cream to her mouth, when she overheard the conversation of middle-aged men next to her, who were munching on dumplings while sitting on a shogi .

“‘I love you’ in English—but isn’t it a bit dull to translate that into Japanese as ‘ware kimi wo aisu’?”

The word “aisu”—to love—made Noriko’s heart race.

“That’s just how it is. No matter how much of a storyteller you are, don’t try to make everything amusing and twist it around.”

“You’re still a boring man as ever. Even in the era of civilization and enlightenment, you should value elegance. For example…”

The man pointed the stick without the dumpling towards the moon, which could be seen faintly in the daytime sky.

“‘The moon is beautiful,’ don’t you think it’s nice and very Japanese?”

“I don’t understand at all. What does the moon have to do with love? Even though it’s the twentieth century, if you keep holding onto such outdated sensibilities, you won’t catch up with the West.”

Listening to this silly conversation, I asked Seiroku, “How would you translate it?”

“Well… how about ‘I think of you as ice cream’?”

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t you get it? It’s a pun on ‘love’ and ‘ice cream.’ If a literal translation doesn’t work, it’s a play on words !”

“Are you an idiot?” he said carelessly, finishing the remaining ice cream. Next to him, the storyteller from earlier was shaking his shoulders, saying, “'Love' and 'ice cream,' that's clever.”

After the men left, Seiroku stood up and said, “Shall we go too?” but Riki pulled on his sleeve.

“...I want to eat ice cream with you, Seiroku-san, a little longer here.”

Seiroku had been staring intently into Riki's eyes, but eventually, he smiled as if to soothe a child.

“Don't eat any more than that. You'll get fat.”

Prompted to go, Riki followed Seiroku with a sullen expression.

When they reached the Akuhika Daimeijin's shrine, Seiroku sighed and turned back.

“Don't say reckless things in front of others. If you're not careful, rumors will spread, and you won't be able to stay at home.”

“...The other day, my marriage partner was decided.”

Seiroku slightly lifted his eyelids and muttered, “Who is the partner?”

“...I'm sorry, I can't say.”

I didn't want to say it. If the other person understood that they were a friend, Kiyoshi would surely distance himself from Noriko, saying, “That's great.” I didn't want such words. What Noriko wanted were entirely different words.

“That's great. Now you don't have to worry about being late.”

However, Kiyoshi, of all people, casually uttered the very words I didn't want to hear.

Noriko narrowed her eyes sharply and confronted Kiyoshi, saying, “I don't want that.”

“Even if you say you don't want it, if you refuse poorly, won't you be disowned?”

“If that happens, I'll run away to Kiyoshi-san.”

“Is it okay to make you my sister-in-law?”

“Please don't joke. ...You must have an idea of what I want to say.”

In the face of Noriko's serious gaze, Kiyoshi was unusually at a loss.

“But I… have always thought of Noriko as like a little sister to me… and I cherish her __”

Before she could finish saying everything, Noriko hugged Seiroku from the front.

“I’m already sixteen... Do you realize that my body has grown since we first met?”

As she tightened her embrace, she felt Seiroku's breath catch his throat.

“My heart has grown too. I’ve reached an age where I won’t cry in front of others. It’s about time you needed me.”

Seiroku's chest rose and fell slowly with his breathing. It was gentle and warm, like a mother’s hand soothing a child to sleep, and Noriko buried her face in it for a while.

Eventually, Seiroku placed his hands on her shoulders and slowly pulled her away.

“When I can take a break next, I’m thinking of taking Kihachi to the exhibition in Osaka. If I leave Kihachi at home like that, he’ll end up just obeying my father and won’t be

able to study electricity for his whole life."

"...What does that have to do with me?"

"Noriko, you should come too. After the exhibition, let's escape together, the three of us."

She chewed on Seiroku's words in her mind repeatedly. Was it a dream, or had she misheard?

"Let's live somewhere far away, just the three of us."

I think that was the happiest moment of my life. Noriko hugged Seiryu tightly.

"I'll send you a letter once the date is set."

However, the letter never came, and before I knew it, winter arrived after summer. In December, Riku was set to enlist in the 9th Regiment in Otsu.

"There's still time before enlistment, so why don't you go visit Riku-kun?"

As he said this, the tobacco was smoldering in the calm face of Jin'emon. It was almost unnaturally so.

From experience, when my father makes this kind of face, he is usually up to something devious .

Feeling suspicious, Noriko took the opportunity of Jin'emon's absence to search the room. After rummaging through the room, she eventually opened the bottom drawer of the chest , and a letter appeared from beneath some documents, freezing her in place.

"This... is a letter from Seiryu-san?"

The handwriting on the address was Seiryu's, but Noriko had no memory of this letter. Why was it hidden in such a place, and why was it already opened?

With trembling hands, she took out the contents and quickly glanced through them, and Noriko was astonished.

"I'm waiting in front of the Ōbayashi Tower when the illumination starts—"

I found the specified date staring , but no matter how I think about it, it’s a date from several months ago. My head spun, and my breath became erratic, causing me to collapse on the spot. I didn’t understand, I couldn’t understand.

The only thing I understood was that an irretrievable situation had occurred without my knowledge.

“Dad, you were hiding this letter!”

When Jin'emon returned, Noriko questioned him with a fierce intensity. However, Jin'emon, smoking a cigarette, remained completely unfazed, turning only his eyes toward Noriko and slowly exhaling smoke.

“I just got rid of unnecessary pests. Be grateful.”

“...Drop dead.”

“What did you say? What kind of attitude is that toward your parent?”

“Is this sneaky behavior what a parent does?”

“Who’s being sneaky? You’re secretly meeting some incomprehensible man while your marriage with Riku-kun is decided. If the name Hyakukawa gets tarnished, how do you plan to take responsibility for that, huh?”

He was slapped on the right cheek by Jinyuemon, who was breathing heavily. Holding his cheek, Noriko glared at Jinyuemon and dashed out of the house. They had promised never to go to each other's homes, but this was no longer the time for such promises.

Taking the Kyoto Electric Railway, I headed towards Shin-kyogoku. When I asked Bunshichi, who was at the Hōrai Buddhist goods store, about Seiroku without revealing my identity, I was told, "He just returned to Otsu to prepare for enlistment."

I didn't think it would be easy to meet him. However, unable to give up, Noriko headed to the Shichijo station.

When she arrived at the station, an upward train was just about to depart. The passenger car doors were already closed, and her eager eyes scanned the passenger car. Eventually, her gaze found the face she hoped to see.

"Seiroku-san!"

When Seiroku, resting his chin on his hand by the window, looked up, he stared at Noriko with an expression of disbelief.

He opened the window and leaned out, saying, "Is that you, Noriko?"

"I'm sorry I couldn't go to the exhibition. My parents hid my letter."

Seiroku opened and closed his mouth, and eventually smiled a faint smile, saying, "I see."

"By the way, regarding the electrical catalog, Kihachi couldn't fill it out until the end, so I wrote the electrical nishiki you gave me as the twentieth entry."

No, that was not given just for that reason.

“What does Seiryu think of us? Am I just a girl like a little sister?”

As Noriko shouted, the train began to move slowly, like a giant caterpillar starting to stir.

“Don’t follow me anymore. It’s dangerous beyond this point.”

“No, I’ll stick with you no matter what.”

As Seiryu gently released Noriko’s hand, which was gripping the window sill , he smiled without a care, saying, “You’re still such a mischievous girl.” The train accelerated rapidly, and Seiryu moved further away.

“But you’re the most beautiful girl in Japan.”

As Seiryu pulled his face back, a red ribbon was thrown out from inside, dancing whimsically against the backdrop of gray smoke . Noriko picked up the ribbon, pressed it against her face, and trembled her shoulders.

No tears came. She had reached an age where she could no longer cry even if she wanted to.

Sitting on the stone steps of Hachimantai at the foot of the Himure Hachimangu , Noriko was stroking the cover of the electrical catalog of the electric brocade, but he must not be aware of the relationship between himself and Seiroku.

Noriko took the fire holder of the lamp and brought the electric catalog close to the exposed .

"Noriko, san?"

Suddenly called out, Noriko flinched and trembled her shoulders.

At the bottom of the stone steps, Kihachi, holding a lamp, was staring blankly at Noriko and the electric catalog, his gaze focused .

"What do you intend to do...?"

Noriko tightly pressed her lips together, and Kihachi took a few steps closer, as if clinging to her.

"I don't know what happened. I just know that if that disappears, Inako won't be saved."

Noriko gritted her teeth. Kihachi cautiously and slowly closed the distance.

"You care about Inako, about your sister, don't you?"

"Different!"

At the scream that was close to Riko's cry, Kihachi's movements stopped.

“I’ve hated Inako since long ago. She’s too honest, believes everything people say, keeps failing, and yet tries again... I couldn’t help but find that Inako detestable.”

It hurt my heart to think it was a lie. Inako is my precious younger sister. The only support

“Even though she’s clumsy, there’s always someone who cares about her. Mother, Riku-san, Kihachi-kun... she’s needed by everyone. Her honesty, purity, and the loveliness that attracts people draws them in, along with our mother’s affection. Inako has so much of what I lack... all of it belongs to Inako!”

“Riko-san...”

“I’ve always been alone! Even Seiroku-san, whom I believed in, didn’t need me!”

When Riko accidentally let it slip, Kihachi’s eyes widened as if he understood.

“I thought that red ribbon looked familiar. It was wrapped around a box of biscuits that my brother bought at the exhibition.”

“...That’s right, it was a gift from Seiroku-san. I wanted to be with Seiroku-san. After the war, I steeled myself. I decided to be with Riku-san for the sake of the family. But Riku-san became strangely distant. He started talking about postponing the marriage and only cared about others. Did he think I wouldn’t mind that much?

...Of course. I had been betraying Riku-san all along, and now it’s too late to talk about it. But I can’t let Riku-san find out about my relationship with Seiroku-san. If he finds out and rejects me, I’ll be all alone.”

Seeing Kihachi's slightly relieved expression, Noriko let out a surprised "Eh."

"Noriko-san has always wanted to rely on someone, hasn't she?"

She couldn't make a sound. Noriko bit her lower lip hard.

"That's right. I'm just a child throwing a tantrum. But I don't want to be alone anymore!"

Resolving herself, she brought the electric catalog down to the fire.

However, just before the fire touched it, a large hand reached from behind and snuffed out the lamp's flame.

Her vision darkened, and the electric catalog was taken from her by someone.

In the midst of her confusion, Kihachi rushed over with the lamp, illuminating the figure of Riku standing behind Noriko. "I finally found you," Riku exhaled, holding the electric catalog tightly.

"It can't be burned. This is a keepsake from my best friend."

As Noriko stood there in a daze, Riku's face twisted in pain.

"I was the one who handed the electrical catalog to Mr. Stewart. I... know."

“What, to”

“I know about your relationship with Seiroku.”

With the thread cut, Noriko collapsed on the spot.

“...Did Riku-san fight alongside your brother in the war?” Kihachi asked in a somber voice.

“We were together the whole time. From the moment we met in school until he died at Nanzan Fortress.”

“Do you know how your brother died?”

Riku lowered his gaze, and after a long pause, slowly nodded .

7

Eleven years ago, I met Seiroku at commercial school.

That said, we were just in the same class and didn’t really talk, so we didn’t seem to get along. Our friendship didn’t deepen much, and by that autumn, the worst flood in history hit Oumi .

At that time, Lake Biwa looked unusually wide, and there were settlements that had been completely swallowed by the water along the coast.

Among those who were involved in the rescue was Seiroku. He skillfully maneuvered a boat through the streets that were flooded up to the second floor, rescuing people who had been left behind in their homes one after another.

However, by a sudden turn of events, Seiroku fell from the boat and was almost engulfed by the debris that was being swept away. I jumped into the water nearby and saved Seiroku, who was on the verge of drowning .

"Thank you, I was saved. But you really are strong," he said, laughing in gratitude.

Since then, I became close with Seiroku, and we often talked at school. His jokes always made me feel cheerful.

During breaks, we often engaged in sumo or judo wrestling among our friends. The size difference between Seiroku and me was like that of a matchstick to a radish, but the result was always my defeat. Seiroku would deftly evade my attacks and easily trip me, throwing me to the ground.

"You wear your thoughts on your face, so you're easy to read," he said.

After yet another defeat, as I lay on my back on the ground, Seiroku laughed and said.

"Really, you're like a train charging ahead," he remarked.

"Are you making fun of me?"

“No, I actually like that kind of thing.”

Seiroku was a man who was overly eager to climb to high places. Whether at school or when he went on trips to other places, he would climb mountains, trees, or roofs whenever he had the chance, enjoying the view from above.

Such Seiroku was often teased by his peers, saying, "Are you a monkey from Hiyoshi Shrine?" and was well-liked.

I was not as good at socializing as Seiroku. I often wondered why the careless Seiroku was the one who received all the attention, even though I lived my life with integrity, adhering to what others told me.

What surprised me was that Seiroku attended Mr. Stewart's Bible class.

Seiroku was particularly interested in the depiction of the Kingdom of God in the Bible and the story of Jesus' sacrifice.

When he delved into the Bible and encountered the teaching "Do good deeds in secret," he found a commonality with the Omi merchant principle of In-toku Zen and thought it was amusing, wondering, "Was Jesus a merchant?" Although Jesus was more the type to drive merchants out of the holy places.

Seiroku learned the Bible while adding his own interpretations, impressing those around him.

In terms of faith, I felt like I was losing to Seiroku.

Being close to the light is a miserable thing.

The brighter the neighbor shines, the darker the shadow we cast becomes.

What spurred those feelings was the presence of Noriko .

In the past, we often faced each other and had fights , but after I graduated from commercial school and Naeko passed away, things got complicated on their side, and we became distant for a while.

When I visited Momokawa's house after a long time, Noriko was playing the shamisen on the porch.

I couldn't help but stop in my tracks at the sight. Her slender, white fingers playing the shamisen, and her eyes tinged with a hint of sadness . I vividly remember my heart fluttering at the sight of Noriko, who had somehow become a woman.

After that, I started to find reasons to talk to Noriko.

However, no matter what I said, Noriko seemed somewhat absent. The arrogant me ended up cursing more than ever and pointing out various things, leading to the same old verbal fights. But the foolish me felt a sense of superiority just because she was paying attention to me, even if it was during a fight.

One day in the thirty-sixth year of the Meiji era (1903). On my way back from the Momokawa household, I unexpectedly ran into Seiroku at Inari Station.

Seeing Seiroku's face, which still retained a childlike quality while being as handsome as ever, filled me with nostalgia, and we chatted about each other's recent happenings and old stories.

During our conversation, I couldn't help but notice the bundle of papers Seiroku was holding under his arm.

“What do you have in your hand?”

“Ah, is this it?” Seiroku casually held up a bundle of papers showing , and I felt a shiver .

It was an electric brocade 's memorandum . It was something that Noriko said she would give to her future husband.

“When I talked about Kihachi 's electric catalog, Noriko brought this just now.”

“Are you meeting with Noriko?”

“Sometimes.”

I was reminded of Noriko when she was playing the shamisen on the engawa.

Noriko's eyes, tinged with sorrow. I clearly understood why she looked beautiful at that moment.

I found myself gripping Seiroku's shoulders.

“What kind of relationship do you have with Noriko?”

“W-what? Why are you so desperate?”

“Could it be that you have feelings for Noriko...?”

Seiroku was confused, but he broke into a smile at my words.

“No, no. It’s not the kind of relationship you’re suspicious of. I only think of her like a little sister, and besides, I prefer older women.”

My heart, having pulled my hand away from Seiroku's shoulder, remained unsettled.

Rather, I clearly realized that within myself, dark and gloomy emotions swirled like a violent storm.

The feelings for Noriko that I wanted so desperately, to the point of reaching out from my throat. This man possesses them without any struggle.

It was an unbearable humiliation. A little sister-like existence?

If you don’t want her that much, then I’ll take her.

And I made the biggest mistake. I arranged for Noriko to become my bride through my family. Before long, the engagement between Noriko and me was settled, and Seiroku could no longer approach her.

Seiroku's behavior afterward was completely normal. However, I anticipated that he was merely putting on a brave front. I wanted to tell him, “Noriko has become mine.”

I was, after all, a foolish person.

Is this truly something that love has done? No, it’s different. I wanted to indulge in my petty vanity immersed it, even at the cost of trampling on the happiness of those important to me.

In the thirty-seventh year of Meiji (1904), the war with Russia finally began.

Mobilization orders were issued to the Second Army, including our Fourth Division, and we crossed the sea towards Liaodong Peninsula.

"You see, if I win this war, I'm going straight to Paris."

Seiroku and I leaned against the ship's railing, gazing at the endless Japan Sea.

"After driving the Russians out of Manchuria, occupying the territory east of Lake Baikal, seizing the Trans-Siberian Railway, and bringing the capital under our control to end the war, I'm going to Paris to climb the Eiffel Tower."

"Why do you want to go up to such a high place?"

"Everyone likes high places, right? It's human nature to want to be above others."

His words seemed to implicitly criticize me, and I couldn't say anything in response. Whether he knew it or not, Seiroku said in a solemn voice, "Hey Riku ."

"You're the one who will marry Noriko, right?"

My vision swayed. It felt as if the date of the Last Judgment had been moved up.

“I heard it from that guy's father during the industrial exhibition.”

“From Jin'emon ?”

“I invited Noriko to the exhibition, but it seems my letter was hidden, and instead, that guy's father showed up at the meeting place. He heard about the promise of marriage to Riku and told me to give up.”

I suppressed the urge to scream and bowed my head deeply.

“I’m sorry for doing something cowardly ! I… I—”

“Stop it. People are watching.”

“Are you holding back for me? Because I saved you during the great flood…”

“Don’t say any more, or I’ll shoot you from behind.”

“Are you… okay with that?”

“I’m not that weak. I’ve already come to terms with it.”

Seiryu laughed so powerfully and punched my chest.

The Liaodong Peninsula juts out to the west from Manchuria. To isolate the Port Arthur , we landed in the center of the peninsula on May 7, and on May 25, we began our attack on the Russian forces holed up in the ancient city of Jinzhou . Our Fourth Division was close to being the first to achieve this, but the explosives meant to destroy the castle

gate were ruined by the rain, and the First Division, attacking from another direction, took the credit.

After occupying Jinzhou Castle, the next target was the Nanshan fortress built on a small hill to the southwest. It was a sinister fortress. There was nothing to hide behind as we approached the enemy positions along the mountainside, and barbed wire was set up, with the enemy artillery covered in reinforced concrete. As the relentless sounds of artillery from both the Japanese and Russian forces threatened to drive us mad, we, deployed on the right flank of the Second Army, stared at the enemy positions.

“The guys from Osaka are quite agitated.”

“We lost the first place, and now we’ve missed the chance to shake off the whispers of ‘Once again, the Eighth Regiment has lost, while the Ninth Regiment is left with nothing.’ It’s terrible. The Eighth Regiment from Osaka has never known defeat, and now they’re mocking even us, the Ninth Regiment, who have nothing to do with it.”

“It seems that wanting to be above others is human nature. Those who mock us are not worth our concern.”

“The army has become quite refined lately. I expect great things from you, Oka Steam Engine .”

“What’s that… ‘Oka Steam Engine’?”

“It’s a play on the old name for a train, ‘Oka Steam Engine.’ Cunning tricks don’t suit you; you should charge straight ahead. Don’t you all think it’s a good name?”

When I called out to my comrades, the regiment laughed and cheered, “That’s right.” After a round of laughter, Seiroku took out a folded book from his backpack and stared at the cover with a prayerful look in his eyes.

“Could it be that this is the electric catalog you always talk about?”

“Ah. Once my father almost burned it. Since then, I've been keeping it.”

Seiroku handed me the electric catalog and said, “Take a look.” It was scorched in several places, and perhaps due to being carried around for so long, the corners and edges were worn. I quickly scanned the catalog, which looked like an ancient document.

“‘No. 9 Lightning Coat’... It projects images on the surface of the coat, allowing even the poor to enjoy various patterns with just one piece. ‘No. 19 Electric Eye ’... Even

blind and deaf people can regain their senses through electric signals."

"It's all written with dreams. Every time I read it, I feel invigorated."

And Seiroku gazed far beyond the fortress in front of him.

"There's also the 'No. 20 Electric Brocade ' entrusted to me by Noriko. That's my talisman."

When Seiroku smiled, the order to prepare for the charge was given. Suddenly, things became hectic, and I tucked the catalog I had almost forgotten into my belt. Gripping my gun, I glared ahead, listening to my racing heartbeat. Glaring .

"Charge!"

With the command given, we all leaped out from our position at once, accompanied by the sound of the charge trumpet.

Until I was deployed, I had imagined war as a scene where warriors simultaneously attacked. However, the wars of the new century were not so beautiful; as we began our charge, the Russian army's firearms all opened fire at once.

When countless rounds from machine guns, exploding shells, and all kinds of murderous intent rain down on the battlefield, what do you think will happen to the people there? The horrors of that time... to be honest, I don't want to speak of it now.

The sound of beans being fried in the firing of machine guns echoed everywhere, and without a moment's rest, shells poured down . Even so, in a world where such death prevailed , we had no choice but to charge forward, using our bodies as shields.

In the later Battle of Port Arthur , I heard that the lessons learned here in Nanshan were not applied, which left me feeling helpless. No... even if they understood, perhaps there was no other way to respond. This country was facing the war of the twentieth century, aimed at thorough slaughter , for the first time.

As I charged forward in a frenzy, a bullet struck my abdomen, and I rolled down the slope from the impact.

Strangely feeling that there was no significant pain in my body, I stood up to find a torn belt and an electric catalog with a bullet embedded in it lying on the ground. As I realized that the electric catalog had absorbed the bullet, Seiroku's face came to mind, and a chill ran through me.

In a panic, I looked around and saw a Japanese soldier lying on his back in the crater left by a shell explosion .

It was Seiroku; I recognized him immediately. As I rushed over, I saw that Seiroku, with unfocused eyes, had been hit by a bullet in almost the same position as mine.

His face had turned pale, and the color was draining from his eyes.──He wouldn't survive. I pressed my hands against my abdominal wound and cried, "I'm sorry, Seiroku. Please forgive me!"

Seiroku's ice-cold hand weakly grasped the hand pressing on the wound, and he trembled as he spoke.

"...Kihachi... Eiffel..."

People do not die while reciting grand speeches like in a play.

Seiryu was mumbling in a voice that seemed to be fading away. It should have been unbearably painful, yet,

“...Nori, ko”

even so, Seiryu seemed to smile in his final moments.

*

“I was saved by this catalog.”

Riku traced the bullet marks with his fingertips before returning the electrical catalog to Kihachi.

“If I had returned the catalog, Seiryu might have been saved. If you want to blame someone, blame me.”

Kihito stared at the electrical catalog in his hands with unfocused eyes.

“I can’t possibly blame anyone,” he could only reply.

“I see,” Riku lowered his eyes and murmured, “It would be more appreciated if you could blame me.”

“...When the Battle of Nanzan ended, I thought I would die in this war. There was no point in living, so I always took the lead on the battlefield. If I was to die, I wanted to use my body as a shield to save as many comrades as possible. But in Liaoyang , Sakagawa , and Kokkodai , no matter how many bullets hit my body or how many shrapnel pierced me, I did not die, and I survived even in the last Fengtian .

Before pulling myself up, I tried to shoot myself in the head, but the finger on the trigger wouldn't move.

In the end, I was a cowardly and cowardly person who couldn't even kill myself.

When I returned to Otsu, I happened to encounter a Russian soldier prisoner wandering the streets. There was a prisoner of war camp on the grounds of Mitsui , and at that time, prisoners were allowed to walk freely.

Upon seeing me in military uniform, the Russians rushed over and realized, 'This is going to be a fight .'

However, they smiled cheerfully and embraced me. When they found out I was a Christian, we went together to a nearby church. Even though our denominations were different from Russia, we prayed together.

That moment was pleasant. We were not killing each other out of hatred. We fought to protect our respective nations, honor, and families. At that moment, I felt that there was no difference in our feelings; we were all brothers. Then, a vague figure appeared in the corner of the church.

With a gaze full of compassion and a rich mustache. Just when I felt that it couldn't be, the illusion vanished.

At that moment, my body felt invigorated as if it had gained new flesh and blood.

I clearly understood why I survived. I must live. For Seiroku, for the enemy soldiers I killed, and for the lives that will be born in the future. To live and survive, to save even a little those who seek salvation. I realized that this is my mission.

“...So after you returned, you devoted yourself to charity work, didn’t you?”

When Noriko, who had been crouching on the stone steps, looked up, Riku's face twisted into a grimace.

“I have always been running away from you. The fact that I tore your relationship apart hasn’t changed... It was my arrogance that caused Seiroku to die. How can I face you now? What should I say? If my survival brings you pain... I...”

“...Seiroku-san was accidentally hit by a bullet,” said Noriko quietly.

“It’s no one’s fault. Yet, wanting to blame God or oneself is probably a way to accept that person’s death. It’s unreasonable, but people want to find understanding.”

Riku covered his eyes with his hand and said in a strained voice, “I couldn’t find any understanding.”

“The more I thought about Seiroku’s death, the heavier the electric catalog became, and it was painful to hold on to it. I thought many times that I should return it to Kihachi quickly, but I was afraid of my sins being exposed . I didn’t want to be blamed for my sins and have my ugliness laid bare.”

“So you entrusted the catalog to Mr. Stewart?” Kihachi asked.

“I intended to take it back and return it to you once I made up my mind. However, that selfish thought led to this commotion. I won’t ask for your forgiveness. I’m sorry.”

Riku bowed deeply. Although he was supposed to have a large physique, in the weak light of the lamp, he looked terribly small.

“I can’t blame you, Riku-san, nor do I intend to.”

With his eyes still downcast, Riku slightly raised his face, and Kihachi forced a smile.

“Honestly, I don’t know how I should feel right now, but I’m happy that the catalog has come back like this. All I have to do now is hand it over to Dr. Paikal.”

That solves everything. As for Riku and Seiroku, I can think about them carefully once things settle down.

“No.”

With a trembling voice, Noriko dismissed Kihachi's hopes.

“Dr. Paikar's goal is not the catalog.”

“What do you mean?” Kihachi asked, his voice trembling, and Noriko began to speak slowly .

When Noriko and Seiroku parted ways at Nanajō Station, it seems that the branch manager of Mizoe store was on the same train car and witnessed everything from a distance.

── The strange book called the Electric Catalog contains the secret method for making Hyakkawa's treasured sake.

During the handover, Yōsuke heard that story and hinted to Riku about Noriko and Seiroku's relationship, threatening Noriko to cooperate in the search for the Electric Catalog. Although he said cooperate, Noriko had no idea where the Electric Catalog was and had nothing to teach him.

However, the day after Inako fell into the Setagawa River, Yōsuke came with a newspaper that had an article about a failed suicide, threatening her again to see if she had any idea where Inako might go. He intended to insist that cooperation was only regarding the Electric Catalog and that he had no intention of revealing Inako's whereabouts, but

“They might have taken the train to go get the catalog.”

I was deeply moved by Yosuke's words, and I revealed that the owner of the Western ship is Stewart and that Inako might be in Hachiman town.

Yōsuke promised, "The catalog will be disposed of once it's no longer needed," but Noriko never believed him from the start.

“With that loose tongue, they also said to us, ‘Electric Nishiki is going to produce in larger breweries and the unprofitable Hyakkawa Brewery will collapse to make a beer factory.’ Hearing that... if the brewery is going to collapse anyway, I thought I should definitely burn the inventory myself...”

Rikiko was staring at Kihachi's face, which had turned dark in front of him, with tearful eyes.

What Dr. Paikal wants to know is the method of making electric brocade that Seiroku-san must have copied into the catalog.

Shichihachi opened the page of the electrical catalog "No. 20 Electric Brocade" with trembling hands.

Next to it, there is only one phrase: "Spicy and sharp, just like electricity as ."

“You understand, right? That catalog is just a sketchbook.”

On the morning of the next day, Kihachi and the others left Stewart's house and boarded a train from Yahata station to head home. Kihachi nibbled on the biscuits he bought in Yahata Town while gazing at the flowing Omi rural landscape outside the window.

The car continued to head south until it reached the foot of Mikami Mountain at the foothill . It ran through the land of Yasu .

Now, the mere field, during the agricultural off-season, becomes a place where the Omi Jofu is bleached, and the spread fabric turns completely white like a snowfield. As I imagine that scene, a figure of a white-clad Inako crosses my mind, and Kihachi suddenly thinks that Inako might look good in a white kasuri kimono.

On the other side of Lake Biwa, the Hira Mountains and Mount Hiei are lined up. If it were Inako, she would probably be pointing and searching, saying, "Can you see Zen Shoku-ji ?"

No matter what scenery I see, all that comes to mind is Inako. Every time I imagine Inako's expression and words, my body and mind heat up. It feels like I have a resistor named Inako embedded in my brain's circuitry.

That Inako is getting married tomorrow. Are you telling me to find a memo of a sake I've never seen before?

The train has just started to cross the Setagawa River. It feels like just a few hours ago that I jumped off here and was helped by Stewart.

"...I wanted to be like Mr. Stewart."

When Kihachi said this quietly, Riku, sitting across from him, looked up and asked, "Like Mr. Stewart?"

"I can't say anything clever compared to that person, and I can't design buildings or play the organ or piano. If I were a splendid adult like him, I might have done better."

"Did you want to be a person who could play the organ?"

Surprised, Kihachi replied, "No."

"Then where is the need for comparison? Rivalry and jealousy are different. Rivalry is a positive emotion that elevates oneself, but jealousy is a negative emotion that can destroy not only oneself but others as well. ...I learned that from experience."

Riku glanced at Noriko, who was sitting across the aisle. Perhaps tired, Noriko was leaning against the window, softly snoring. Her sleeping figure, faintly illuminated by the light from outside, resembled a beautiful painting.

Riku turned to Kihachi, and his expression was so gentle that it seemed a lie compared to Heizei's stern face.

“You are going to create paradise with electricity, right?”

At Banba Station, Kihachi and Riku got off, while Noriko continued on to Kyoto. After parting with Riku, Kihachi returned to Zenshokuji and explained the situation to his parents before lying on his back on the tatami in the inner room.

There was nothing he could do to help Inako anymore, and Kihachi weakly looked up at the closed shrine on the kamidana.

As the sun set and darkness filled the room, a lamp was lit. Moving only his eyes, he saw Enki sitting beside Kihachi, gently tapping his head.

“You did well.”

There was something rising from his chest at the words that had never been spoken in his childhood.

“...Even if I tried, I couldn't do anything with my strength.”

“That's to be expected. Human strength is limited. So when there's nothing you can do...”

“Believe in the power of Amitabha ?”

As Kihachi felt a premonition that the sermon was about to begin, Enki grabbed his arm as he tried to get up and leave.

“Rely on us,” he said, his rough hand filled with warmth and strength.

“You can rely on me, Kei , Bunshichi and Yagakukai and the people around you without hesitation. There isn’t a single person who lives solely on their own strength. Why do

we connect with family and friends? It’s because we can’t do it alone; people support each other to find happiness.”

Enki's gaze was strong, and warmth radiated from his rough-skinned hand.

“When Matsudaira ’s parents passed away, it was the montō who had been distant until then that truly cared for me when I was feeling down. They came to check on me with vegetables and fish, and they started asking our temple to hold memorial services and Hōonkō again... I have been supported by so many people, including the montō and my family, and through the connection with Amida , I have learned from various people.”

Releasing Kihachi's hand, Enki showed a very gentle smile.

“What Amida wanted to convey through his other power might be something like that.”

As Kihachi felt a lump in his throat, suddenly, “Kihachi big brother,” YajirōYajirō peeked in with an innocent smile from between the sliding doors, followed by Ito, Mitsu, and SadakichiSadakichi all tumbling in together.

“What’s up with you all? All ?”

“I brought them,” said Bunshichi with a carefree expression, and Ito puffed out his chest.

“I came to visit Matsudaira's grave. Since Yajiro-chan would feel lonely, I plan to stay at Yajiro-chan's house with everyone tonight.”

Mitsu and Sadakichi nodded repeatedly, and Yajiro panicked, saying, “Wait a minute, I haven't heard anything.”

Seeing the usual scene, Kihachi couldn't help but smile. Eventually, when the children left the inner room, Bunshichi said, “Brother, it's been a while.” and sat down next to Enki.

“Bunshichi, why don't you go to the public bath a bit more? You're all covered in dandruff.”

As the two lit their cigarettes , the smoke swirled together in the air.

“More importantly, Kihachi, did you find the electrical catalog?”

When Bunshichi asked this, he silently handed over the electrical catalog, and while holding a cigarette, he glanced through it. As Kihachi talked about what had happened

so far, Bunshichi opened the page of the 《Electrical Brochure》 and traced the text with his finger.

“Hey, have you two ever seen the memorandum of the electrical brochure?”

Seeing Enki and Bunshichi shake their heads in unison, Kihachi sighed.

“...I've been teased by my brother so much, but I never thought I'd be tossed around like this even after he's gone.”

“Hey, Kihachi,” Bunshichi said with a very serious face.

“Kiyoshi is more clumsy than you think. He rarely shows his true feelings. He has always cared about you in his own way.”

“Then why did he open the closed shrine? Why did he trample on what I believed in?”

“From your perspective, Kiyoshi may have seemed like a selfish person. Akubi opening that shrine must have had some unavoidable circumstances.”

“As if it were someone else's business. That shrine was also important to my uncle .”

“Well, that's true,” Bunshichi looked up at the kamidana.

“My mother prayed desperately for me, who was weak, by being struck by the waterfall at Inari Mountain and running all night on the approach. She had the Akubi spirit she received through her training sealed in a bunkai in a zushi .”

“ Zushi ?” Kihachi felt a sense of discomfort. A zushi is a simple storage box with a door that opens like a Kannon and is not suitable for the name of a closed shrine that looks like a smaller version of the shrine's main hall.

“When I tried to carry that zushi home, I tripped and got a big scratch on the front. It was difficult to fix the scratch, but it looked bad as it was, so we decided to cover the scratch with the zushi. I kept this a secret between my mother and me so that my family wouldn’t worry.”

And Bunshichi pointed at the closed shrine.

“So, the shrine you see now is the outer box that protects the zushi.”

“Such a thing…” Enki exclaimed in shock, while Kihachi stood frozen in disbelief.

“Kihachi?” Bunshichi called out. Kihachi stood up as if he had been fired and brought a step stool from the corner of the room under the god shelf, climbing onto it with trembling legs.

“You can’t be—” Enki gasped, and Kage and Yajiro also came into the inner room, wondering what was happening.

His heart raced with tension, and he felt like he should stop this ridiculous act. However, Kihachi extended his trembling fingertips and unlatched the small clasp on the front door of the shrine.

His heart was beating more violently than ever before. He was terrified beyond measure.

But the conviction he held was stronger, and Kihachi steeled himself, though his feelings were still unsettled.

He slowly placed his hand on the shrine door and then flung it open with force.

Peering cautiously, he saw a small black vertical shrine sitting deep inside the shrine.

The double doors, scratched and worn, had a seemingly secure clasp on them.

It must be the real unopened shrine that Bunshichi mentioned.

And leaning against that altar was a bundle of papers that read, "Electric Nishiki Memorandum ."

“So this is it…”

Kiha took out a bundle of papers and quickly glanced through them. This time, it was definitely the item he was looking for.

Looking back inside the shrine, he noticed that there were also wax tubes and postcards, along with Seiroku's personal belongings.

“Did you know about the unopened shrine, big brother?”

Suddenly, he noticed a small wooden box, about the size of his palm, placed among them.

“What’s this?”

On the lid of the box, there was a label that read “ Santakuro ”, and Kiha's heart raced.

When he opened the lid, it was filled with magic lantern plates, and he pulled one out to examine it closely.

“Could this be…?”

As Kiha stepped down from the platform, he found Yajiro standing behind him with a magic lantern.

“I think we need this. I took it out from that closet over there.”

Astonished Kihachi handed over the lantern projector, and behind the carefree laughing Yajiro, the children from Night School were grinning.

Kihachi thought to himself, this guy is really sharp, and with a wry smile, he placed the lamp from the inner room into the lantern .

A plain round light appeared on the wall of the dark room.

He selected the first lantern plate from the box and inserted it into the lantern projector,

“Twentieth Century Electric Catalog”

and the words appeared in the light.

With trembling hands, he swapped the lantern plate, and an image of a man in a shining Inverness coat was projected. After staring at it for a few seconds, Kihachi suddenly remembered and took out the electric catalog from his pocket, opening to the first page .

“‘The First Night Unaware ’… Electric Light clothing. You can walk the night road without holding a lamp.”

He swapped the lantern plate for the next one.

“The ‘Second Writing Artifact’…… appears with the spirits of ancestors and family members illuminated by electric light, captured in photographs.”

This time, a picture of people happily taking a commemorative photo with translucent ghosts was displayed.

“I told you, he has always been concerned about you.”

Before I knew it, Bunshichi, who had been standing beside me, said in a serious voice.

“Kiyomuro regretted leaving you behind at the exhibition. Seeing you, who had become unable to see in the darkness because of him, he had been atoning all along.”

Wen Qi narrowed his eyes and said, "So that's why you made this," as he gazed at the lantern.

"Even if Kihachi is trapped in the darkness, he can read the electrical catalog."

“...Did you not return the electrical catalog all this time to make this...? No matter how much I was scolded or how terrible things were said to me, did you keep it hidden all along...?”

Don't mess with me, Kihachi said angrily.

“If you made the lantern, you should have just told me. What’s the need to hide anything──”

On the way, Kihachi stopped speaking and looked at the sticker on the box that said " Sankakuro ".

Once, what did Seiroku say to me, who said I couldn't believe my brother?

──Well then, if Santa Kuro brought the electrical catalog, would you believe me?

Kihachi pulled out several lantern slides. They must have been commissioned from a professional lantern painter; each picture was delicate, showing that considerable time and effort had been invested. "No way," Kihachi looked up.

If this had been completed just before Seiroku was deployed.

"On that day, was it to hide the completed '20th Century Electrical Catalog' that the unopened shrine was opened?"

When he returned from the war, it was to give it to Kihachi as a gift from Santa Kuro.

Just for that one reason, to be believed by Kihachi.

"I thought my brother had always looked down on me..."

"No... that's not it, Kihachi."

With a pained expression, Bunshichi hesitantly opened his mouth.

“It was Seiroku who made it possible for you to attend middle school.”

“Middle school...? The tuition is being covered by uncle right?”

In place of Bunshichi, “Kihachi” and Enki said in a quiet voice.

“What do you think made Seiroku, who even considered eloping, smoothly withdraw from the daughter of Hyakukawa?”

Kihachi shook his head, unable to answer.

“During the exhibition, Mr. Hyakukawa approached Seiroku with a contract to facilitate the breakup. He said, ‘I’ll pay for Kihachi’s middle school tuition, so from now on, no one from Sakamoto should have anything to do with Hyakukawa Sake.’ I only found out about this after the war ended. One day, Mr. Hyakukawa showed me the contract.”

“So, the one who was paying the tuition wasn’t my uncle, but...”

“It was Mr. Hyakukawa,” Bunshichi replied.

“I had heard about the tuition from Seiroku, but he told me, ‘I don’t want to make Kihachi feel uncomfortable and hinder his studies,’ and made me keep quiet... I’m sorry for staying silent until now.”

Kihachi repeated in his mind, “What is that?” His limbs felt heavy, and he couldn’t open his mouth properly.

The truth of that night at the exhibition and the fact that his current life was a result of Seiroku giving up on Noriko pierced deeply into Kihachi’s heart, leaving him speechless.

“I will read the continuation,” said Bunshichi, taking the electric catalog from the stunned Kihachi's hands.

“‘No. Electric Cannon ’… Moves humans at the speed of lightning .”

With a new lantern picture, Bunshichi read aloud cheerfully. The lantern progressed, displaying flowers that bloom year-round with electricity, automatic puppets that entertain people, and devices that cook various dishes automatically, as children clapped and cheered .

In the lively back room, a sudden, piercing voice echoed. Turning to see whose voice it was, Enki had his face on the tatami, crying uncontrollably. Kei was rubbing his trembling back, his cheeks wet with tears.

It was an unexpected sight. I had always thought my father was someone who never cried.

As Kihachi returned his gaze to the lantern, the final lantern picture was projected before him.

"'No. 20 Electric Brocade '… Sharp and spicy, just like electricity itself ."

It was a picture of a pair of men and women sharing a drink. Their faces were blurred, but it was a picture filled with happiness.

As Kihachi envisioned the electric paradise, seeing it shine brilliantly, the words spoken to him on the train came back to his mind.

──You will create paradise with electricity.

Driven by something, Kihachi pulled the lamp from the projector.

"I'm just stepping out for a bit."

"Now? Where are you going?" Bunshichi asked with a puzzledlook.

"I'm going to a friend's house. I need to ask about the location of tomorrow's wedding ."

As I stepped outside, it was indeed pitch dark, but Kihachi took a deep breath and resolutely started running.

After passing through the village where light leaked out, I emerged onto the path between rice fields . The night sky was somewhat cloudy, with stars occasionally visible through the gaps.

To my left, Lake Biwa should be spreading out, but I could only see sparse lights on the opposite shore, making it hard to discern the boundary with the bank. The shadows of the towering mountains on my right had an eerie sense of intimidation.

As I tried to run while avoiding looking around as much as possible, the lights of Otsu City gradually drew closer.

Perhaps that’s why I felt relieved.

My foot caught on something, and I stumbled forward.

The lamp that had gone out slipped from my hand and fell into the rice field. Suddenly, everything around me became pitch black, and sweat began to pour from my entire body. I struggled to breathe, and my limbs felt weak.

Although Kihachi tried to keep his heart strong, anxiety and fear overwhelmed him, and he curled up on the spot.

Is it really that darkness is no good? It’s pathetic that even at a time like this, I am clumsily afraid the darkness.

Just when Kihachi felt like he wanted to burst into tears, a gentle light from above illuminated him.

Looking up to see what the light was, the moon appeared from behind the clouds. It was round like the light of a flashlight . The moonlight, where a rabbit was diligently pounding , was gentle and eased Kihachi's tense heart. Kihachi took a deep breath once more.

Having regained his composure, Kihachi slowly stood up and stepped forward again.

*

At Yahata , Inako heard from Yosuke about the relationship between Kiyoko and Seiroku, and the contract with Seiroku that he had heard from Jin'emon.

──If Kihachi-kun interferes with the Hyakkawa family any further, he might not be able to attend middle school.

Kihachi is a person who will create paradise with electricity and eventually save many people.

Inako decided to end the journey, thinking that someone like him could not hinder to that.

The day after returning from Yahata. While he was absentminded in his room, Jin'emon came in looking cheerful.

“Finally, tomorrow is the wedding with Dr. Paikar.”

When tomorrow comes, there will be no turning back. But perhaps because I thought of a slight escape route until tomorrow, I inadvertently said, "Was this the right thing?"

Jin'emon slapped the tatami with his hand, and Inako trembled. However, Jin'emon did not get any angrier; instead, he smiled and said, "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Why do you think I noticed the relationship between Noriko and Sakamoto's eldest son?"

Inako pondered for a moment and replied, "Did you hire a detective?"

"That's right, a detective. An exceptionally talented one. That detective was an honest guy, and he told a maid who was close to him at the time, 'Believe in God more, and you'll receive letters from God like your sister.'

Inako, who had been listening intently, felt a strong wave of past memories wash over her, and her skin prickled all over.

Her body trembled slightly, and her vision wavered.

"The suspicious maid came to consult me, you see. --Hey, detective."

A high-pitched scream echoed throughout the room. It was hard to believe that such a shrill voice, like that of a monster, was coming from her own mouth. If she didn't keep screaming, it felt like her chest would be torn apart from within.

Until now, she had lived thinking it was all unreasonable. Even though she hadn't done anything wrong, why did she have to suffer so much?

However, it was different. I was also hurting others, my sister. This hell was the punishment given to me by God for selfishly wishing for paradise after trampling on the happiness of others.

As the screams subsided, Jinnemon's emotionless hand gently Inako's back, which had collapsed face down on the tatami.

"Don't blame yourself. Rather, you did well. Your strength lies in your naive obedience to what others say, just like believing in God. Dr. Paikar has status, power, and the

ability to act. There is no mistake in what he says. If you trust him and let yourself go, you will live happily."

Jinnemon stood up and said, "I'll leave it to you tomorrow," as he tried to exit the room.

"...Where is the wedding venue?"

In a withered voice, Inako asked, and Jinnemon turned back with a smirk.

"It's on Lake Biwa."

8

A chartered steamboat, which had just started service this month, was floating on Lake Biwa.

──Why is there such a need to celebrate something as simple as just registering a marriage?

Under the intention of Yosuke , there were no preparations such as engagement gifts or greetings to both families greetings .

Since it was originally a gathering to celebrate Yosuke's appointment as branch manager, there were no formalities like mediator people, and after Yosuke's brief greeting, the participants, dressed in mon less and ro kimono secured with hekoobi , freely engaged in casual conversations and enjoyed the Western liquor and dishes prepared on the table.

In her usual navy kasuri attire, Inako sat in a chair without touching the food on the table, looking around the boat with a sense of unease. Most of the participants were employees from the Mizoe store's Fushimi branch or people associated with the sake brewery, and there was no sign of anyone from the main branch of Mizoe, such as Saki.

While feeling disheartened that her marriage was being treated so lightly, Jin'emon was in high spirits, going around pouring drinks. Riku had been leaning against the railing, gazing at Lake Biwa with a stern expression, while Noriko wore a socially appropriate smile, exchanging greetings with those around her.

Suddenly, Inako's eyes met Noriko's, and she hurriedly looked down .

Having returned to Fushimi, Inako was in a semi-house arrest state, so she had only exchanged greetings with Noriko, which she was grateful for.

“ Kihachi was unfortunate, wasn’t he? In the end, he couldn’t bring the catalog by the deadline.”

Yosuke, whose face was already flushed from drinking, spoke to Inako, who had become almost a shell of herself.

“It’s unfortunate about the catalog, but well, I’ll definitely get it eventually.”

This person will become my husband. The resolve I thought I had feels unreliable, like a stick stuck in the mud.

The summer sun beats down mercilessly, yet strangely, I don’t feel the heat. I’ve been feeling breathless since morning. This uncomfortable tension feels similar to the sensation before receiving an injection at the hospital.

“Well then, the atmosphere has warmed up, so it's about time I handed this to you.”

Looking at the pearl ring placed on Yosuke's open hand, all the internal organs in her body shrank in fear.

Even though she had steeled herself, even though she had accepted living in hell.

“Hurry up. Stand up.”

Yosuke grabbed Inako's hand, and she instinctively pulled away. For a moment, Yosuke frowned, but then he twisted his mouth into a grin and said, “It’s okay,” as he firmly grasped Inako's wrist to make her stand.

“No—” the moment she let that slip, Inako finally understood.

That she had no resolve at all.

In a corner of her heart, she had been secretly believing that he would come to save her, somewhere deep down.

Frustrated, Yosuke forcibly made Inako stand and called out to the participants.

“Everyone. From now on—”

"What a strange ship is coming!"

As Yosuke's call echoed, a man gazing at Lake Biwa interrupted with a slurred voice . Someone rushed to the railing and said, "It's a boat that looks like a catfish." Inako, escaping from Yosuke, leaned against the railing and caught sight of a white boat approaching with a rhythmic .

A familiar boat was attached to the stern of the chartered boat, and two men boarded.

One was, for some reason, holding a wax cylinder phonograph, Yajirō. And the other was.

"Kihachi-san──!"

Kihachi, locking eyes with Inako, smiled proudly.

Ignoring the surprised Jin'emon, Kihachi stood before the haughty Yosuke.

"I don't recall inviting you here."

"I brought what we promised, so I came to deliver it."

Kihachi presented a paulownia box tied with a string to the frowning Yosuke.

"I brought the electrical catalog."

*

Gathered people whispered among themselves, and beside the stern-faced Riku, Noriko anxiously placed her hand on her chest. Jin'emon had a mixed expression of anger and astonishment, as if he might snap at any moment.

“Did you really find it?”

“Yes. The method for making the secret sake Nishiki is properly documented.”

Without breaking his haughty demeanor, Yosuke turned his gaze to the paulownia box held by Kihachi.

“It's [[1]]Denki Nishiki[[2]]Denki Nishiki[[/2]][[/1]]!” Jin'emon's furious roar echoed, piercing the air.

“Boy, where did you find that?”

“I received it from the man you once entrapped .”

With a dismissive tone, Jin'emon tightly shut his mouth tight .

Yosuke, having received the paulownia box, attempted to inspect its contents, but Kihachi restrained him, saying, “Before you confirm, ...”

“As promised, please declare the annulment of your marriage to Inako here.”

“...What do you mean?”

Yosuke had a ridiculously blank expression on his face.

“You keep talking about promises, but I have no recollection of any,”

As the surroundings buzzed, Kihachi was filled with a quiet anger contained . What kind of upbringing would allow someone to act so nonchalantly?

While fuming , he also felt a sense of pity for Yosuke.

“Only a man as peculiar as me would marry a woman who is utterly useless in life. — This marriage is, in a way, a charitable act. Don’t you think that’s admirable?”

Suddenly, the noise mixed with Yosuke's voice resonated quietly, leaving everyone dumbfounded .

“—Inako-chan may seem like a good girl, but she’s surprisingly arrogant . Despite being incompetent, she tries to choose a man.”

“This is—” For the first time, Yosuke's face twisted in shock.

When Kihachi turned around, Yajiro was playing a wax cylinder phonograph with an indifferent expression.

“When did this happen?” Yosuke looked at the phonograph, and Yajiro stuck out his tongue.

This guy is really sharp, Kihachi wanted to laugh.

While Yosuke was making a deal with Hōrai at the Buddhist goods store, Yajirō, who had a phonograph, recorded the conversation just in case.

'—If I can prepare the electrical catalog by Shūgen , I will cancel my marriage with Inako-chan.'

'Then, I will hand over the electrical catalog to Dr. Paikar by the deadline.'

“Wow, it’s really recorded well,” Yajirō nodded with satisfaction, and all the participants turned their eyes to Yosuke.

“...No, it’s just a joke for kids.”

The eyes of the crowd watching the flustered Yosuke began to show signs of doubt. As if to blow away that atmosphere, Jin'emon laughed loudly and pointed at the paulownia box with his cane.

“That electrical nishiki is not a secret liquor or anything, just a failed product.”

Another murmur ran through the crowd. Perhaps everyone was getting tired of being surprised.

“So, it means it’s not sellable?” Yosuke asked, his eyes wide with disbelief.

“That's right. The method written there is a failure example. It's just a test record.”

Jin Uemon proudly boasted. It's the first time I've seen someone talk about their failures so happily.

“However, regardless of the content, it doesn't change the fact that I delivered the promised item.”

Jin Uemon glared at Kihachi, who was arguing back, with an astonishing intensity glaring .

“You... if you stir up Momokawa 's house any more than this, do you know what will happen?”

“You won't be able to get your tuition paid anymore.”

“That's right. Do you intend to waste your brother's wish to send you to middle school?”

“I don't mind.”

Kihachi said it nonchalantly.

“What my brother wanted was for me to create paradise with electricity.”

Jin Uemon, with his mouth agape, eventually deepened the wrinkles on his face and gritted his teeth.

“I can't!” said Inako, bewildered.

“You're going to study electricity, right? If that's the case, it should be fine as it is now.”

“As long as I can tighten stomach, I can study anywhere.”

“...Why—” Inako, unable to hold back, let out a sob .

“Why would you do this for someone like me? ...I'm just a person who makes others unhappy...”

“You know I’m not good with darkness.”

Inako looked puzzled. Just as she decided to say it, she suddenly felt embarrassed.

“I can't manage without light. I can't manage if you’re not alive, Inako.”

Although Kihachi was shy, he still managed to smile proudly.

“If Inako isn’t laughing beside me, life will be dark and unbearable.”

The grasshopper, with tears welling in its eyes, covered its mouth with both hands.

Eventually, wiping tears with the back of his hand, he faced forward, strong, and took a step forward.

“W-wait, are you really going to choose a man who only talks?”

Yosuke tried to stop him with a quivering voice.

“I can buy as many pearls and jewels as you want. Women like shiny things, right?”

When Inako came next to Kihachi, she turned back and mischievously smiled.

“The light from the electric lamp is sparkling too, isn’t it?”

The people who had been quietly observing burst into laughter at Inako's words.

Yosuke, who was embarrassed, looked like he was about to cry.

“Shut up!”

When Jin'emon shouted loudly, the place fell silent, and he snatched the paulownia box from Yosuke.

“Riku-kun, hold that kid down.”

With his arms crossed, Riku glared at Kihachi with a fierce look .

“Mr. Jinuemon, please spare us,” “That’s dirty,” came the heckles flying in like a council meeting, to which Jinuemon shouted back, “Shut up!”

“I am their father. I know well how my daughters can live happily.”

Turning to Kihachi with a triumphant face, he untied the string of the wooden box and forcefully opened .

“Indeed, the negotiations have collapsed.”

Jinuemon, peering eagerly inside the box , had his eyes widen in shock.

The box was packed tightly with gray inari sushi-like items, and upon closer inspection, each one was wriggling and shaking its fur.

“In that case, I will have to send Inako along.”

When one of them squeaked, “Chuu,” a swarm of mice jumped out of the box.

Amidst everyone's surprise at the massive outbreak of mice, it was Jin'emon who raised a roar to the heavens, a death throe .

Once, I asked Inako why Jin'emon chased after the mice at the restaurant in Otsu. It seems the reason lies in the Hyakukawa rice riot, where a large number of mice infested the sake brewery. "Since then, I've truly come to hate mice, and I chase them whenever I see them," he told me.

The children of night school gathered mice overnight, and even Kihachi, who brought them in, was taken aback by the amount.

Amidst the chaos of cries like "It's under the desk!" and "It's gone into the hakama!", Jin'emon was waving his cane and shouting, scattering people around him rather than the mice.

"Plague, the plague will spread!"

In the midst of the commotion, Yosuke, losing his composure and leaning against the railing, was approached by Kihachi and Inako.

"It seems quite serious," Kihachi said casually, and Yosuke, with his hair disheveled, glared at him.

"Do you know what will happen to you for treating me like this?"

"What will happen?" Inako said, bringing the mouse she easily caught through a handkerchief closer to Yosuke.

"Hey, stop it, please stop!"

Feeling cornered, Yosuke placed his foot on the railing and began to climb backward over it.

“Kihachi, can’t you do something instead of just watching?”

“Understood.”

Kihachi grabbed Yosuke's legs and lifted him up in one go.

Yosuke, in an unstable position, easily fell backward and plunged straight into Lake Biwa.

“I can’t swim—” the dying scream vanished as water splash up.

“I did something.”

“Kihachi, hurry up!”

Stewart called from his boat. Next to him, the cheeky Yajiro was waving his hand.

First, Inako was placed on the unstable boat, and as Kihachi tried to board next,

“Wait, you brat!” Jinueimon charged in from behind.

Jin'emon mercilessly brings down his stick on the opposing Kihachi.

Kiha defended himself with the pocket flashlight he pulled from his pocket, but an unusual shock ran through him, and the knocked-down flashlight bounced on the deck,

scattering broken lens pieces as it disappeared into the lake.

Kiha, who had fallen on his backside, held back his emotions and glared at Jin'emon with a glare .

“——That flashlight, high is something else!”

“I’ll compensate you no matter how much it costs!”

Jin'emon, with his eyes wide open, swung down his poised cane with great force.

However, it suddenly struck a thick arm that reached out from the side, and the sturdy cane easily snapped in two. “Ah!” cried Yajirō, the bamboo whip craftsman.

“You…”

Riku, who had been facing away to protect Kiha, slowly stood up and confronted Jin'emon.

“ Foolish thing to do. You’re okay with not getting Noriko, right?”

“Being a fool is just fine.”

Riku grabbed Jin'emon's collar and lightly threw him with a shoulder throw.

Jin'emon, who was thrown to the floor, let out a muffled "guhuu" sound.

" Riku steam is the type of person who rushes forward."

Noriko, who rushed over, looked down at Jin'emon, who was dizzy on the floor, and turned pale.

"Riku-san, is this really okay? If you do something like this..."

"It's true that things have gotten bad, but I no longer want to run away from you."

Riku boldly lifted the bewildered Noriko.

"So, let's escape together."

As Riku carried Noriko, whose face was bright red, the boat drifted away from the chartered vessel. It seemed the commotion on the deck with the rats had not yet settled, and Riku, after putting Noriko down, made a strained face.

"I wonder if they are still buying rats. If I catch one, how many ice creams can I get?"

“The effort I put into gathering Kai was worth it…” said Yajiro weakly, having had his proud product crushed.

In the boat, facing Noriko, Inako had a somewhat downcast expression.

“Inako, what’s wrong since yesterday? It seems like you’re avoiding me.”

As Inako hesitated, Noriko gently placed her hand over Inako's and smiled softly.

Inako opened her mouth in tears, saying, “I did something terrible.”

“Because of me, Dad found out about the letter from your god, and then...”

Noriko seemed to immediately understand what she was talking about.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please don’t hate me,” Noriko enveloped the sobbing Inako.

“It was something that would have been found out sooner or later. It’s okay, I won’t hate you for something like this now. Inako is my precious little sister. Trust me about your sister.”

As Noriko pulled away, she wiped Inako's tears away . Inako smiled and said, “I understand, I believe you.”

“Believing is my strong point.”

When the time was right, Kihachi handed the memorandum Denki Nishiki memorandum .

“This is Denki Nishiki,” Inako said, wiping her tears as she quickly glanced at the contents.

However, as she continued reading, Inako's eyes clouded over.

“This is the sake that was being brewed when I entered the koji room . As Father said, it’s a failed product.”

Seeing Inako downcast, Kihachi began, “About that Denki Nishiki...”

“Inako, I have a small favor to ask. Will you listen?”

Inako, who had been in a daze, gradually brightened up and eventually nodded with a smile nod .

After being dropped off by the accompanying pilot at Yabase , the group parted ways with the steward who had come to see them off and Yajiro, who had work at the store, as they arrived at Kusatsu Station.

“Here you go, big brother. The phonograph.”

Kihachi received the hand carried bag containing the phonograph from Yajiro.

Hearing the clattering sound in the bag, Riku twists his neck and says, "That's quite a heavy load."

“The wax cylinder that my brother hid in the unopened shrine wax cylinder is also included. Since it's quite a load anyway, I thought I’d bring it along to listen to when I have some free time. More importantly, Yajiro.”

Kihachi ruffled Yajiro's hair roughly ruffled .

“Thanks to you, I was saved. Much appreciated.”

Feeling shy from the honest praise, Yajiro hid behind Stewart, saying, “I’m looking forward to the souvenir story.” Stewart stepped forward and smiled at Kihachi.

“I’ve been a bit mischievous at my age. It might be because I’ve picked up Seiroku-kun’s personality.”

When Stewart extended his right hand, Kihachi smiled and shook it.

“I apologize for the trouble. Please let me repay you someday.”

“No need for thanks. Instead, please come visit Hachiman and let’s sing together again.”

Kihachi and the others boarded the train heading towards Kansai in the direction of Mie. As the train departed, it left behind Stewart and Yajiro, who were waving from the platform.

Outside the train window, a peaceful mountain landscape flowed by for a while.

“It would be fun if the four of us could live somewhere far away like this.”

While looking at the passing scenery outside, Inako said.

“The four of us, huh? That means I would have to call Riku-san ‘brother’.”

“Stop it, that’s creepy.”

“‘Brother’? Are you planning to marry Inako?”

Inako's face turned red in an instant, as if it would make a popping sound. Kihachi, feeling his own cheeks heat up, tried to cover up, saying, “Ah, no... that’s not what I meant.”

“You really are like siblings. The way you fluster as a girl is just like Seiroku-san.”

To the laughing Noriko, the sulking Kihachi retorted.

“Noriko-san, your smiling face looks just like Inako’s, and it’s adorable.”

This time, it was Noriko’s turn to turn red.

With her mouth flapping, Noriko narrowed her eyes sharply and nudged Riku in the side with her elbow.

“What, what are you doing?”

“Please say something as thoughtful as that.”

Everyone's faces turned red, as if the seat of the train had experienced an early autumn.

I thought there was no connection between myself and Inako, but when I considered that Seiroku had been connecting that bond invisibly, Kihachi felt a strange emotion.

“...Electricity and God are the same, aren’t they?” Kihachi said quietly.

“Both God and electricity are invisible, but they take visible forms like electric lights or scriptures and pastors, becoming the light that illuminates the world. Just as electricity powers machines, God moves people to create a better life and paradise. Thinking about it this way, humans might be electromagnets .”

“Electromagnets, if I remember correctly,” Inako seemed to recall the electric therapy device she saw at Stewart's house.

“A magnet only has magnetic force when electricity flows through it. Humans, who become electromagnets when the electricity of God flows through them, are drawn together by the invisible magnetic force of ‘ connections ’, forming visible bonds and supporting each other.”

“God and science, the essence of things in this world might actually be the same.”

“Thinking about it this way, a world without God is scary. Without magnetic force, no one tries to connect with others, and they only think about themselves. Living without anyone's help is impossible.”

The words that Riko said anxiously pierced deeply into Kihachi's heart.

Will the world where "God is gone" eventually come?

When society's science and technology have developed to their limits someday, how will people, who have lost the purpose of wanting to be "better than now" and no longer have electricity flowing within them, live?

The train advances, as a symbol of the development of civilization. The train mercilessly overtaking humans.

"...In a bright place, the lantern won't be visible," Kihachi murmured.

"With the advancement of technology, a world that is naturally bright. If that happens, will the lantern... the dream not be visible?"

In response to Kihachi's words, Inako casually said, "It'll be fine."

"At that time, all you have to do is create a lantern that can be seen even in bright places, Kihachi-san."

Surprised, Kihachi laughed and ruffled Inako's hair, saying, "That's true."

Eventually, the train passed through the mountain pass at the border and entered Mie Prefecture. The four of them transferred to the Sangu Railway train at Tsu Station, heading for Yamada Station, the gateway to Ise Jingu.

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Jin'emon, who got off the chartered boat, and Yosuke, who was drenched, boarded the train of the Kansai Railway, following the four. In the swaying carriage, Yosuke kept muttering, "This isn't how it was supposed to be," which Jin'emon watched with a feeling of unease.

The train carrying the two arrived at Yamada Station. Exhausted Yosuke, who was feeling worn out, immediately stepped off the platform and said, "They made a fool of me...! I will definitely catch them," and began to walk with determination.

It was easy to follow their footsteps. Inako's short hair stood out annoyingly.

While inquiring with the station staff and the rickshaw pullers in front of the station, they discovered that the two had headed towards Ise Jingu's Naiku, and they arrived in front of Uji Bridge, which spans the Isuzu River. Unlike the vermilion torii of the Inari Shrine, a simple wooden torii, built in accordance with Japan's ancient architectural style, stood in front of the bridge.

At that moment, they finally spotted the two they had been searching for, sitting on a shōgi at a nearby tea shop, and Jin'emon and Yosuke quickly approached them.

"Did you think you could escape, you fool...?"

However, as they closed the distance, Jin'emon gradually began to notice something was off. The short-haired woman and the man in a hakama ... although they were wearing the same clothes, both had an unusually mature physique.

"You guys... no way."

"Oh, you've figured it out, Riku-san."

"Of course. You might be fine, but look at my body."

Sitting on the shōgi was Noriko, wearing a dark blue kasuri kimono, and Riku, who looked like Kihachi, perhaps having bought a costume along the way. No, more than that.

“Noriko... um, hair...”

With trembling fingers, Jin'emon pointed at Noriko's hair.

“When I said, ‘Please make it the same as my sister's’ at the Tsukuba, the hairdresser was so surprised.”

“If you cut it that short...”

Noriko's long black hair was cut short, styled along the collar, just like Inako's trimmed .

“Short hair in the 20th century isn't bad. It's cool, so maybe I'll keep this hairstyle for summer.”

“I think long hair suits you better.”

“Oh, how nice of you to say that.”

As the two exchanged leisurely banter, Jin'emon began to feel dizzy.

“You two, considering that I would be searching for Inako based on her appearance...”

“We are parent and child, after all. I understand my father very well.”

As consciousness faded, Jinnemon collapsed on the spot.

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Regaining consciousness quickly, Jinnemon hurriedly retraced his steps with Yosuke.

Riku sat on a bench watched the people passing by on the street when he suddenly made eye contact with the neighboring Noriko.

Her clear eyes seemed to absorb everything. Perhaps drawn in by those eyes, he found himself saying, "I have something I want to tell you," as Noriko tilted her head slightly to the side and listened.

He had been hesitant to express something he felt might make Noriko feel as if she would be forever distant from him.

However, having exposed such a cowardly side of himself, there was no longer any need to hide.

"Actually... I have a message from Seiroku."

It was during the time they had landed on the Liaodong and were marching towards Nanshan .

"Once, I told Riku that 'Noriko is like a little sister'."

Seiroku, who was walking alongside him, suddenly said that.

“That’s half a lie. As I watched Riki grow little by little, I unknowingly started to see her as a woman... By the time I realized it, it was too late.”

Seiryu chuckled and nudged Riku's shoulder.

“I’m not blaming you or anything. If it’s Riku, I can understand. I even got to see your frustrated face.”

“Hey! That’s a bad taste, you bastard.”

“It’s mutual, isn’t it? Besides, in the end, Riki came to see me. Just being able to give her what I wanted to give her is a relief as they say.”

After laughing heartily, Seiryu clapped his hands and said, “Right.”

“If you survive, there’s something I want you to tell Riki.”

“Don’t say such ominous things.”

“Rather, it’s a wish. If I say this, you’ll think you’ll definitely make it back alive, right?”

Riku sighed and said, “...I understand. Go ahead and say it.”

“I think of you as ice cream.”

“...What is that?”

“If it's Noriko, I think she would understand.”

Seiroku said this with a cheerful smile.

Once everything was conveyed, tears flowed down Noriko's cheeks.

When I asked, “Do you understand?” she replied, “Yes,” with a mix of sobs and wiped her tears away .

“These are the words I have been waiting for, for so long.”

Noriko smiled as if troubled. Her eyes were moist , but there was no longer any trace of hesitation.

“...I was only thinking about myself and couldn't save the person I needed to save the most.”

“Mr. Riku has saved many lives on the battlefield and in this country. But in truth, what you wanted the most was to be saved yourself, wasn’t it?”

Not wanting Noriko to see his current expression, Riku turned his face away . However, Noriko cupped Riku's cheeks with both hands and faced him directly. Her glistening eyes sparkled like candy .

“ Confession , as they say. Even if God does not forgive you, I will forgive you.”

Riku thought again that he no longer wanted to run away, looking at Noriko's strong gaze.

“I am waiting for you. Even if you do not choose me, that is fine. It’s okay if Seiroku remains in your mind. I will always wait for your answer.”

“...Are you planning to wait even when I grow old?”

“If you think of it as a rehearsal for the Last Judgment, it’s an easy thing.”

Noriko took out a memo from the electric brocade ’s memo from the furoshiki nearby. She lovingly held the memo, which she had received back from Kihachi on the train, close to her chest.

“I still cannot give an answer. ...It’s a bold request, but if in the future my heart is decided, will you forgive me? Will you need me?”

“If that will be your salvation.”

With the memo still in her arms, Noriko rested her head on Riku's chest and said, “...Thank you,” bowing deeply.

“Besides, at least you are needed by Inako.”

"Huh?" Noriko raised her face.

“When Inako-kun caught a cold a long time ago, only my sister stayed by his side to take care of him, and he often talked about that. That’s why he likes and respects his sister.”

“That’s not true,” Riko shook her head.

“I was the first one to catch a cold. The people around me said, ‘You took your medicine, so you’ll be fine,’ and they quickly went back to work. …It was a lonely time. But just before noon, Inako, who had gotten his kimono all muddy, came to my bedside. And then that kid said, can you guess what?”

With that, Riko smiled gently.

“He laughed and said, ‘I asked Akubi to help, so I’m fine now.’ It must have been a long way from home to the mound, especially for a child. After that, he stayed by my side to take care of me until I got better. That cold ended up getting passed to Inako, and I just took care of him in return.”

“What a kind child.”

“That’s why I like Inako. She’s my proud little sister, someone I wouldn’t be embarrassed to show off anywhere.”

“You seem indifferent, but you’re kind too. You know… I think of you as ice cream.”

Riko, who had been taken aback, eventually started to shake with suppressed laughter.

“You don’t even understand the meaning of that.”

“So what does that mean?” she pouted, and Noriko laughed brightly . Riku turned his face away with a huff and said, “...I wonder if Kihachi and Inako are doing well by now.”

“It’ll be fine, I’m sure. You see, there’s another word for thunder, ‘ lightning ’. It seems that ‘wife’ used to mean ‘opposite-sex partner’ back in the day.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it,” Riku said, and Noriko laughed as if it were about herself.

“Rice and electricity, those two are a perfect match. I’m sure they can support each other and overcome challenges.”

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Before Kihachi and Inako, a vast expanse of water stretched out, too wide to fit in their view.

The horizon stretched straight from end to end, clearly defining the boundary with the evening sky. Waves continuously crashed onto the sandy beach, and the sound of countless grains of sand being washed was pleasant. The water’s surface was lead-colored, and hints of red and yellow were beginning to mix into the blue sky.

“It’s so vast,” Inako exclaimed in awe.

The two sat side by side on the sandy beach, gazing endlessly at the boundless sea.

After taking the train from Yamada Station on the Ise Electric Railway, they had arrived at Futamiura futami ga ura , facing the sea instead of the Inner Shrine. Behind the beach of Futamiura, a row of pine trees stretched out, and beyond that, inns and other buildings lined up in a row.

“I finally got to wear my sister’s kimono.”

The grasshopper that stood up fluttered the sleeves of Noriko's white kasuri . Although it was just a temporary disguise, the joy of being able to wear the kimono she had longed for was great, and Inako ran towards the sea.

Standing at the water's edge with arms wide open, spinning around, the white kasuri kimono dyed in the sunset sways fantastically.

That figure evokes the electric National fire dance Hiodori seen at the Industrial Exhibition, and Kihachi was momentarily captivated by it.

Eventually, Kihachi stood up and approached, saying, "Inako, about that outfit..."

"Are you going to say something about a teru teru bozu again?" Inako squinted her eyes slightly.

"Inako really looks good in white clothes. You're beautiful."

With Inako's face turning red, Kihachi hurriedly turned his face away. He hadn't intended to say "beautiful."

To hide his embarrassment, Kihachi shouted with all his might towards the sea.

The voice was absorbed by the sea, never echoing back. Still, Kihachi continued to shout. Inako stood beside Kihachi and shouted with all her might as well. Her voice was higher than Kihachi's, carrying a somewhat cheerful resonance. The overlapping voices of the two were absorbed by the mother sea, as if soothing a playful child, without leaving a trace.

"...In the end, we couldn't see Mount Fuji."

Inako said sadly after finishing her shout.

“The words that Kiyomitsu and probably Naeko also mentioned, ‘You can see Mount Fuji from Ise.’”

“However, what actually spread out before them was only the sky and the sea, with no mountain shadows in sight. Kihachi felt the same way he did when he realized that Santakuro was a fictional character.”

“Are you satisfied, you guys?”

“When he turned around at the low voice, Jin'emon and Yosuke came over, looking utterly exhausted.”

“Jin'emon's face was the color of dirt, and his Kaiser mustache was disheveled like the legs of a octopus , while Yosuke's eyes were bloodshot.”

“What do you plan to do by running away in desperation? Don’t make us waste our steps.”

“The two, looking like fallen samurai, staggered over.”

““‘Sorry to keep you waiting, you two.’””

“At that moment, Yosuke's face twitched as he saw someone running from the pine tree avenue.”

““‘I’m sorry, even though you came all this way. The business meeting dragged on.’””

“S-Saki...?” Yosuke said with a surprised voice, and Saki tilted her head curiously in response.

“Hey, brother. What are you doing here?”

“No way, did you come to Ise to meet Saki?”

Saki looked back and forth at the adults who had turned into ghosts, then asked Kihachi.

“So, what do you need from me?”

Saki was staying at a prestigious inn with a spacious garden featuring pines and stone lanterns.

As Kihachi walked down the second-floor corridor, he felt that this was a place he would never have any connection to, and eventually, he was led to the tatami room that Saki used for business meetings.

When he opened the glass window, a cool breeze brought in the faint sound of waves and the scent of the garden's pines.

While Saki sat comfortably in a formal seiza position on the laid-out cushions, Yosuke appeared restless the whole time, and Jin'emon became tense the moment he realized Saki was from the Mitsumoe family.

“Actually, there’s something I would like you to receive, Saki-san.”

When Kihachi took out the electrical catalog from his pocket, Jin'emon frowned.

“What are you going to do by handing that to Saki?”

“It’s to fulfill a promise. To get Inako’s marriage canceled.”

While Jin'emon was puzzled , Yosuke was like a child who was on the verge of being found out, feeling fearful .

“It would be embarrassing if I’m wrong, though.”

Inako started after comparing Saki and Yosuke.

“You’re talking about Dr. Paikar, right?”

With his mouth agape, Jin'emon’s eyes widened.

──Is Dr. Paikar really about Yosuke?

Inako had been harboring this question, albeit faintly, for a long time.

“At the ryotei in Otsu, Yosuke-san described Hyakkawa’s sake as dry. Our sake is a mellow, feminine type typical of Fushimi. The impression of it being dry applies to Nada . At that time, I didn’t know about Saki, so I didn’t think deeply about it…”

Inako gives a glance at Saki, who relaxes her mouth.

“Since meeting Saki, my questions have grown. I learned from Saki that Baijiu is white liquor ... a distilled spirit from the Qing Dynasty. Saki's preferences are all about distilled spirits like whiskey and vodka. Perhaps the stories about Yosuke traveling the world for business are all about Saki.”

“Really, Inako-chan is a very observant child.”

Saki, who laughed innocently, bowed to the stunned Jin'emon and said, “Just as Inako-chan said.”

“I am Dr. Baikal, also known as Saki Mitsuzoe. Please remember me from now on.”

After that, Kihachi told Saki everything that had happened so far and played the recorded conversations he had brought with him on the phonograph.

After finishing listening to the phonograph, Saki called out “Brother” in a cold voice.

“N-no, this is to make business a little smoother.”

When Saki's expression changed to one of anger and she shouted “Brother!”, Yosuke shrank back.

“You've always made excuses, haven't you? Even when you didn't jump from the pole and when you returned home with relatives because you were fed up with life in Vancouver. You always complain but rely on others to live, and for your own freedom, you sit cross-legged on the freedom of others. You’re like a bad lord. Because of that nature, I, the woman you look down on, will inherit the family estate.”

“W-well, even if you say that, I...”

Yosuke, who was completely intimidated by his younger sister, was sharply rebuffed with, "Is that an excuse?"

"You have no power at all, yet your voice is so loud,"

The following story is something I heard from Saki later.

Saki, who returned from a traveling sales business that spanned the world, was recognized for her talent and it was decided that she would inherit the family business of Mitsuzou Shoten. Yosuke, whose pride as the eldest son was crushed , aimed to prove his worth to the main family and, after being appointed as the branch manager of Fushimi, used the name and achievements of Dr. Paikar to deceive the sake brewery he was in charge of.

The story about the electric brocade that he heard from the previous branch manager had been greatly exaggerated, and Yosuke, eager for success, believed without much evidence that the electric brocade was a miraculous sake and became obsessed with it.

When Saki clapped her hands, her attendant appeared.

"Please take my brother to Matsusaka. When he returns, I will deal with him,"

The attendant pulled the dejected Yosuke and led him out of the tatami room.

"I apologize for showing you something unpleasant. Now, I just need to receive the electric catalog, right?"

Saki held the electric catalog in her hands for a moment before returning it to Kihachi.

“Yes, with this, I declare the marriage between my brother and Inako-chan invalid.”

Inako, with a deep sigh of relief that could be seen even from the side, placed her hands on the tatami and bowed her head, saying, "Saki-san, thank you very much." Meanwhile, Saki gently spoke to the slumped Jinnemon.

"Momokawa-san, my brother is that kind of person. He is not suitable for Inako-chan."

"...Saki-san, I apologize for the rudeness, but I must ask."

As Jinnemon solemnly opened his mouth, Saki tilted her head slightly and asked, "What is it?"

"Could you leave me alone with this monk for a while?"

"Yes, that's fine. Please take your time."

Inako cast a worried glance at Kihachi, but she was taken to the hallway by Saki.

In the spacious room, Kihachi and Jinnemon sat facing each other. Jinnemon, with his arms crossed, said, "Electric Nishiki .

"I also gave it a grand Kesa

"Why is it called 'Electric'?"

“Once, when I went to Tokyo with my wife, I saw electric lights for the first time on Ginza street.”

With his arms crossed, Jin'emon spoke in an extremely quiet voice.

“Did you aim for a dry sake, different from women's sake, as stated in ‘Bitter and dry, just like electric light ’?”

“That's just a promotional phrase,” Jin'emon shook his head.

“‘A sake that brightens the heart of the drinker like the light of electric lamps’... this is its original meaning.”

Kiha was taken aback by words that were almost unimaginable from Jin'emon.

“I promised my wife that we would create such a sake together to bring happiness to the world and our family. But... the prototype failed, and my wife has passed away. It seems this will never be completed.”

“About that,” Kiha interjected, and Jin'emon frowned.

Kiha placed the electric catalog on the tatami and opened all the pages for him to see.

Behind “No. 20 Electric Brocade,” there are several pages filled with notes.

“This is my book of prophecies. So I tried to write the prophecies of electric brocade in the car.”

“What does that mean?” Jin Uemon furrowed his brow.

“First, by introducing machines from the stages of polishing and washing rice, and then steaming the rice in a koshiki , we can improve work efficiency and stabilize quality.

I’ve heard that in the process of cooling the steamed rice, the sooner it’s done, the better, just like fanning vinegared rice with a uchiwa . Here, a cooling device will play a crucial role.”

Kihachi moistened his lips and continued explaining.

“By using air conditioning machines, it’s possible to adjust the temperature suitable for the growth of koji mold in the koji room . No, if we manage the brewery itself with air conditioning machines, it will be possible to produce sake year-round, which was said to be best in winter, and we can expect an increase in production, and perhaps even create different types of sake.”

“Four-season brewing, huh?” Jin Uemon murmured, glaring at Kihachi.

“...Did you come up with all this?”

In response to Jin Uemon's question, Kihachi simply denied, “No.”

“I know nothing about sake. I heard everything from Inako, and we brainstormed together.”

“That guy... when did he come up with all this?” Jin Uemon's eyes widened in astonishment.

“I forgot to mention, but during the pasteurization process, we can safely sterilize without compromising quality using electric control. ...So, there’s no need to worry about Inako burning her hair during pasteurization practice.”

With a meaning beyond words, Kihachi fell silent before Jin'emon.

“Before Inako's hair was tidied up, some of it was burnt . When Inako caused the fire, didn’t you cut her hair to prevent the flames from spreading to it, Jin'emon-san?”

Jin'emon crossed his arms and let out a deep sigh, “That's right,” he nodded .

“Still, there must have been other ways to put it out. Cutting the hair of a girl at that age...”

“Shut up, Inako's nervous habits... are inherited from me.”

After clearing his throat, Jin'emon glared at Kihachi.

“By the way, you seem quite obsessed with electricity; are you planning to become a doctor?”

“No, my goal is to create a paradise in this world with electricity.”

Jin'emon snorted.

“In short, it’s a world where people just stand in front of the shelf with their mouths open, waiting for rice cakes .”

“Huh...?”

“I have been desperately working for the development of the store. I have tried to survive by stepping on others and pushing them aside while reaching for the few sweet dumplings on the shelves. The people I cannot forgive the most are those who stand in front of the shelves, waiting for scraps like fools .”

Jin'emon gritted his teeth, and Kihachi felt overwhelmed by his intensity.

“Those kinds of people call those who have worked hard to obtain sweet dumplings greedy and curse them. They claim that they have the right to demand a share of the sweet dumplings that someone else has desperately obtained, as if it were their natural right. Do you intend to aim for a world that saves such people?”

Jin'emon glared at Kihachi with bloodshot eyes. Kihachi could not imagine what kind of life Jin'emon had lived. That’s why Kihachi thought he would boldly express his true feelings.

“Everyone should become moon rabbits.”

“...What?”

“Each person becomes a rabbit, making rice cakes and creating sweet dumplings. If it’s impossible for one person to do it alone, everyone helps each other to make them. Some rabbits might be good at making mallets and mortars . By having the will to live together, aiming for abundance, and caring for and recognizing each other, I want to build such a world with the power of electricity.”

“A world where everyone... makes sweet dumplings.”

Jin'emon fell into a deep, deep silence. Kihachi patiently waited for Jin'emon's words.

After a long, long silence, Jin'emon slowly raised his eyes.

“What do you want to become with Inako?”

Hearing Inako's name made my heart thump . Suddenly, my whole body pulsed, and hot blood rushed to my face.

“Inako's smile is bright... so, um...”

“Enough with the pleasantries!”

“Please give me Inako!”

The room fell silent again. My heartbeat was annoyingly loud.

Kihachi couldn't suppress the rough breaths escaping from his nose. Blood surged violently through his body, and his face throbbed intensely. He was afraid of the next words from Jinyuemon. Fear and tension dominated Kihachi.

Jinyuemon, arms crossed, was staring intently at the void with a deep shadow cast by the sunset that streamed in through the window. The tension reached its peak, and time seemed to flow endlessly, infinitely.

“You broke a promise, ruined someone else's engagement, and yet you have the audacity to propose an engagement yourself... Don’t you think that’s a bit selfish?”

“I do think so,” I squeezed out from my dry throat. Then, I took out a thick furoshiki bundle from my bag and spread it out in front of Jinyuemon. His face twitched at the sight of the revealed bundles of cash.

“I will return the full amount of the tuition fees you have provided so far.”

“You… a child can’t possibly prepare this kind of money. What happened?”

“I borrowed it from my father. It seems that a certain monk is looking for a Buddhist priest, and I agreed to take on that job as a condition.”

“Are you okay with that?”

When Kihachi nodded strongly in agreement, Jin'emon let out a deep, slow breath.

“Inako is clumsy. So I thought that if I could marry her off to a rough man who wouldn’t mind that clumsiness, she might be able to live a bit more comfortably. But that’s only if the other party has a good family background.”

It may be a luxurious , but I want to do everything I can for the family and for my daughter. I hope Inako's husband has a good family background, or at the very least, graduated from a national university. I can't say your family background is good, and unfortunately…"

With a defiant smile, Jin'emon grabbed the bundle of cash.

"With this, your path to higher education is gone. Marrying Inako is impossible."

By the time the conversation with Jin'emon was over, Riku and Noriko had arrived at the inn. Since it was already dark, Saki had prepared rooms for everyone at this inn as a form of compensation.

Kihachi, sharing a room with Riku, sat at a lamp-lit desk that night, listening to Riku's exhausted breathing while facing the electrical catalog.

When I closed the electrical catalog, I glanced at the red ribbon that was beside me.

When Noriko cut her hair, she returned it to Kihachi, saying, "I no longer have hair to tie." Kihachi poked the ribbon with his finger and stretched out widely. Tonight, I feel too excited sleep.

As I stepped out of the room into the corridor lit by the lantern , I saw Inako standing by the window, basking in the night breeze, standing still .

Inako, noticing Kihachi, showed a surprised expression.

"Inako, can't you sleep either?"

"A lot has happened," Inako smiled . From the open window, the sound of waves washing the sand could be heard, and while listening to it, the two naturally began to talk about going to see the night sea. Since we were going, Kihachi prepared the phonograph and the wax cylinder that had been unopened in the shrine, and quietly slipped out with Inako from the entrance.

Outside the inn, there were few lights, and we could hardly see each other's faces as we walked side by side.

"The road is still dark, but are you sure it's okay without a flashlight ?"

Kihachi smiled at Inako and replied, "It's already fine."

In front of the inn, the pine tree-lined path had lit lanterns lined up, and as the two of them walked to the end of the path through the pine trees, they arrived at a shrine built along the rock wall.

As they walked along the narrow path where the waves lapped close by, they soon saw the shrine building and sat down side by side in a suitable spot. This place is famous for the two rocks that jut out from the sea— Meoto Iwa —but unfortunately, the sea before them was pitch dark, and they could not see its form.

In the area, lanterns are lit, and the moon floats in the sky. Kihachi prepared the phonograph and inserted a suitable wax cylinder, and the relaxed sound of the shamisen began to flow.

After listening to the sound of the phonograph for a while, Inako said quietly.

“Kihachi-san, do you know about 'God's little touch'? Even if the sake brewing process is repeated exactly the same way, sometimes a different flavor comes out. My mother called it 'God's little touch.'”

“Oh, that's an interesting way to put it.”

“In everyday life, I desperately prayed for God's little touch. I thought that as long as I revered and believed, I would receive it. But that was just a way to blame God somewhere in my heart when something bad happened, avoiding my own unpleasant aspects.”

It's common to see mirrors enshrined in shrines. Recently, I've come to think that God is like a mirror. When people make wishes or express gratitude at shrines, they might be using the space of God to face themselves. The results of their laziness or efforts come back to them.

If you only rely on God in sake brewing, you can never make good sake. It's only when you put in your utmost effort that God gives you the final little touch.”

Inako gazed powerfully into the distant sea.

“I want to become a toji like my mother.”

Before I knew it, the music had stopped, and a clear voice struck Kihachi's ears.

“I loved that sake brewery where I spent time with my mother. I want to study more about sake and complete the electric Nishiki . Even if my father opposes me, I won’t run

away this time. It's still difficult now, but I want to believe in myself. Believing is my strong point."

She smiled brightly and warmly, making me feel energized.

"Thank you, Kihachi. Because you illuminated it with electricity, I was able to notice the important thing that had been rolling at my feet."

Kihachi took advantage of the music stopping and turned his face away from Inako to touch the phonograph.

"You're shy."

"Shut up."

Thinking of playing something lively, Kihachi inserted another wax cylinder .

"Now, what song will it be next?"

"I wonder if there's a Salvation Army song or something."

'──Hey, can you hear me?'

The sudden voice of a man heard from the phonograph made the two look at each other.

"I'm not good at writing letters, so I decided to leave words using a wax tube."

It was Seiroku's voice.

It was mixed with noise, but without a doubt, it was the voice of my brother that I hadn't heard in years. Suddenly Kihachi released the needle, trembling, and returned it to the initial position, starting the playback again.

"—Kihachi, can you hear me?"

"I'm not good at writing letters, so I decided to leave words using a wax tube."

"If you're listening to this, it means you've opened the sealed shrine. I don't know why that happened. Maybe, like in the past, you've stopped believing in gods."

“I also couldn’t believe in gods or Buddhas when I was younger, and once opened a sealed shrine when I was a child. But as soon as I opened it and saw the zushi , I realized I was feeling relieved.”

“While I arrogantly lectured that there were no gods, deep down, I truly wished for their existence.”

“Why do people believe in gods and paradise? Foolish me finally understood that meaning.”

“Because they can’t be seen, there are no souls of the dead or paradise. But to forget the dead would be too lonely. The dead can only live among those who remain. Even if it’s nonsense , by thinking that the dead sleep in their graves, stay close to loved ones, and live peacefully in paradise, we try to accept our sorrow. It’s painful that they can’t be seen, but it’s also a form of hope.”

In Christianity, there is a saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed." The mustard seed is small, but when sown , it grows larger than any vegetable and becomes a tree big enough for birds to make nests in.

Kiha's electric paradise is surely the same.

As each person begins to shine, even if that light is small, it gathers through the connections made, eventually creating a world filled with light. Kiha's paradise, illuminated like an illumination with electric lights , must sparkle like the Milky Way when viewed from the moon.

I am looking forward to enjoying the paradise created by Kiha while pounding mochi with the rabbit on the moon.

And when Kiha has fulfilled his natural life and comes here, let's all eat sukiyaki together.

The moment the playback stopped, Kiha let out a wail towards the pitch-black sea.

Regret and sorrow pierced through his body, and the tears flowing from his eyes overflowed without restraint. While crying out, Seiroku finally understood why Takai liked high places.

He was trying to confirm whether the afterlife truly exists in the heavens.

To climb even a little higher. He wanted to believe in the existence of paradise.

"I didn't want to look back at my brother."

“If I die, I will go to the moon,” Seiroku said sadly at the tower of the exhibition.

“I wanted to prove that there is paradise in electricity, to reassure my brother.”

Seiroku had always believed in Kihachi. In Kihachi's electric paradise.

Kihachi picked up a small stone and threw it into the sea. Mixed with the sound of the waves, a splash of water could be heard.

“Come out! If there really are gods and Buddhas, then come out!”

He shouted over and over, throwing stones, but they were swallowed up into the vast sea in vain.

“If you’re there, come out! Show yourself... Please... just come out... Just one word... Let me say I’m sorry... Let me say thank you...”

Kihachi knelt down on the spot, crying and shouting, when Inako's warm hand touched his arm.

“Until now, you’ve been doing things that would anger the gods at the shrine and the grave.”

Inako gently rubbed Kihachi's arm and said in a soft voice.

“Kihachi, you’ve always wanted to catch the attention of the gods.”

As the tears settled, Kihachi murmured, "It was painful not being able to see him."

"No matter how hard I strained my eyes, it was painful that my brother was nowhere in this world,"

"What are you talking about?" Inako tightened her grip on the hand resting on her arm.

"You know exactly where your brother has gone,"

With tears streaming down his cheeks, Kihachi looked dumbfounded, and Inako, with a proud expression, pointed to the moon floating in the night sky.

"You said he was making rice cakes with a rabbit on the moon. That's good enough, right? This time, I'll believe what your brother said."

Looking up at the small light in the night sky, he whispered, "So he was there."

He had been searching for that important person who had shown him various worlds and given him so much.

" Santakuro is on the moon."

As he listened to the will repeatedly, the night was coming to an end. Kihachi and Inako sat close together, watching the edge of the sky begin to lighten.

She pointed at the two rocks that were emerging from the water, saying, "Those rocks."

Meoto Iwa is. Between the rocks, a shimenawa is hung, and a small torii gate is placed on top of the larger rock.

When the two stood up, they stood side by side on the cliff.

The light grew stronger, and gradually the stars became invisible. The surface of Meoto Iwa and Inako's expression became clearer. And beyond the sea, there was the horizon──.

“What is that?”

Kihachi couldn't believe his eyes. Until yesterday, he had certainly seen the horizon straight ahead. However, where the horizon should be, unfamiliar mountain ridges stretched from end to end.

He thought he had been gazing at the Pacific Ocean all day yesterday. But when he recalled the map of the area, Kihachi understood.

At the southern end of Ise Bay, which curves in a reverse "tsu" shape, lies Futamiura , and this coastline faces north.

In other words, he was only unable to see it due to the haze yesterday, and now, with the air clear, he was witnessing the true appearance of Ise Bay, where the inland mountains are lined up.

Inako tugged at Kihachi's sleeve, urging him to move.

“Kihachi-san... could that mountain be...?”

In the middle of the couple's rock. Behind it, there was a particularly large mountain.

A gently sloping triangle mountain with a slightly sunken peak, yet dignified.

Nishiki was a sacred peak Reihō that I had only seen in pictures and paintings.

"Is that Mount Fuji?"

The morning mist hung over it, blurring its outline, but there was no mistake. It was summer, so it wasn't covered in snow, but it had a sacredness that embraced all who looked upon it.

"It's smaller than Oumi 's Mount Fuji."

Inako laughed, and Kihachi nodded . Perhaps it was too far away, but the sacred peak looked adorably small, like an inverted choko . Light began to shine through from behind the mountain a little distance away from that Mount Fuji.

A round light, as if magnified billions and trillions of times from a electric light , gradually began to reveal its form.

"We made a promise, didn't we?"

Inako said, wiping her moist eyes.

“Mr. Kihachi kept his promise and showed me Mount Fuji. So this time, I will become a god and grant one of Mr. Kihachi's wishes.”

Under the sunlight, Kihachi felt his heart tighten and heat up at Inako's faint smile.

“...Hand”

“—Eh”

“I want to hold Inako's hand.”

Without hesitation, Inako reached out and took Kihachi's left hand.

The sensation of her hand, softer, colder, and smaller than he imagined, made the blood in his whole body boil joy.

As their fingers intertwined, they didn't let go until Mount Fuji became hazy invisible.

*

The two of them walked slowly along the sandy beach of Futamiura while holding hands.

“Kihachi-san, aren't you hungry?”

“I'm fine. What about Inako?”

“I only had a little. ... Until I got here, I ate a lot of different things.”

“ Mitsui Temple 's Benkei Mochi Mochi . That was delicious, Kinako-chan.”

“Don’t bring up weird things. Also, the sukiyaki was delicious.”

“ Hachiman Town's red konjac surprised you, didn’t it, Koyadofu-chan?”

“The ice cream was really cold, though.”

“ Detchi Yokan was also delicious.”

“Eh! I didn’t eat that.”

“Even though you have a body like Detchi Yokan.”

“I’m not that flat,” Inako puffed her cheeks.

“...What about coffee?”

“It was bad”

“That was bad.”

Both of them burst out laughing and tightened their grip on each other's hands.

“Since we’ve come all the way to Ise, I want to try Akafuku. Ise udon might be good too.”

“You’re always thinking about food.”

“Oh! … We haven’t visited the Ise Shrine.”

“Let’s come again next time,” Kihachi said with a smile , and Inako also nodded .

“I want to go to more places with you, and eat a lot of delicious food.”

When Inako waved the hand she was holding, Kihachi smoothly pulled his hand away.

“Once we get this far, we attract attention.”

Before they knew it, the two had made their way close to the inn.

“...It feels like it’s over in the blink of an eye, just like before dawn.”

Inako said with a sense of regret.

After finishing breakfast at the inn, everyone arrived at Futamigaura station. Just as the train was stopping, Noriko, Riku, Jin'emon, and Saki boarded the train, followed by Inako.

When she turned around, Kihachi had stopped there, looking up at Inako with a relaxed expression.

“Kihachi-san? What are you doing? The train is leaving.”

“...Sorry. I can’t go with Inako.”

Kihachi's words were difficult for me to digest .

“I made a contract with Jin'emon yesterday, and I have to take responsibility for taking Inako around.”

Inako instinctively tried to jump off the train, but Jin'emon grabbed her arm to stop her.

“I won’t be returning to Kyoto for a while.”

“Where are you going? What about school?”

Kiha smiled gently smile but did not try to answer.

“Don’t ask, Inako. That’s the kind of contract it is,” said Jin'emon calmly.

“That’s... too much, far too much.”

Looking at Kiha's face, Inako was convinced. Perhaps he would go to a place very far away. To the point that she was worried.

“Hey, let’s travel together more, share various stories, and joke around.”

“Then will you come too, Inako?”

When Kiha said this in a soft voice, Jin'emon let go of his hand. When Inako turned around, Jin'emon was looking away with his arms crossed. Now, she could go with Kiha.

However.

“I won’t run away anymore.”

Inako did not move a single step.

“I finally found something I can do. Even if it's tough, I don't want to run away.”

“I thought you would say that,” Kihachi said with a satisfied smile as he handed something to Inako from his pocket.

It was an electric catalog wrapped in a red ribbon.

“I finally completed it. Thanks to you, Inako.”

Without the luxury of being sentimental, the train slowly departed.

Inako stretched out her arm with her pinky finger raised towards Kihachi, who was getting farther away.

“You'll definitely come back. We'll become gods again and grant wishes.”

In a flash, Kihachi also extended his pinky, but it barely missed and brushed past, parting without intersecting.

“Don't worry about the form, just keep believing,” Kihachi shouted.

“We are connected by things that can't be seen!”

As soon as Kihachi's figure disappeared, he staggered and collapsed on the spot, dropping his gaze to the electric catalog in his hands. Inako, with trembling hands, untied the ribbon and opened the electric catalog, flipping through to the last page . There, he found a prophecy added to the previously blank page. It simply stated,

“The Twenty-First Love”

It was written simply like that.

When I closed my eyes, which had become blurred with tears, I felt Kihachi's voice echoing in my head.

―Humans are electromagnets. Normally, they have no magnetic force. But the moment they meet someone of the opposite sex, if an electric current runs through their body, that person possesses magnetic force. Thus, two people drawn together by an invisible bond, which is this magnetic force, will someday form a marriage. A time will come when people attracted by electricity can freely unite.

“From now on... love will be conducted through electricity.”

Whispering so softly that no one could hear whispering , Inako held the electric catalog tightly, embracing it for a long time.

“The twentieth century is the century of electricity.”

9

After Inako returned to Fushimi, she learned through others that Kihachi had dropped out of a middle school in Kyoto, and as autumn approached, she heard that a monk had been found who would go to the Canadian port town that the master of the Zenshokuji congregation had been searching for. Inako felt a mix of certainty about Kihachi's destination and anxiety.

In September, a large-scale riot had erupted in the Japanese district of Vancouver. It seemed that the local workers had grown increasingly anxious about the Japanese, who were working hard for low wages.

“In this world, there are still those who think it is only natural to take others' mochi .”

Jin'emon was outraged while reading the newspaper that reported on the riots.

Even after Kihachi left, the Meiji era progressed rapidly.

In the following year, Meiji 41 (1908), the sixteen white-painted warships, known as the "White Fleet," arrived in Yokohama as the United States showcased its naval power by conducting a world tour.

Fifty years earlier, when Perry's black ships arrived, there were only four vessels that could do nothing, but to welcome this grand fleet, Japan's proud main battleships, sixteen in total, appeared. Everyone felt that Japan had finally reached its long-cherished goal of becoming a first-class nation, standing proudly alongside great powers.

The Meiji era progressed rapidly.

There were incidents involving the clairvoyant and Halley's comet . Some went to Antarctica, while others flew in airplanes.

Domestic phonographs and medical X-ray devices emerged one after another, the unequal treaties with Western countries that had lasted for half a century were

completely abolished, and by this time, the country had grown enough to appreciate the taste of coffee.

July of Meiji 45 (1912).

Everyone ran on without a care, and the Meiji era came to an end.

August, the first year of Taisho (1912).

Inako, who was on the Kyoto Electric Railway to see the fire festival, was struggling with the baby she was holding. The white kasuri fabric given by her sister was being tugged at, and the baby was trying to grab the ends of Inako's short hair, which had been cut neatly evenly .

“Even if you can make sake, you can't handle a baby,”

Noriko laughed brightly. Her hair, which she had cut short five years ago, had completely returned to its original length.

“ Kiyoshi is really energetic,” Inako said, handing Kiyoshi back to Noriko. Noriko, who was skillfully soothing the baby, was being watched with kind eyes by the man sitting next to her, Riku — Momokawa Kengo.

Despite the twists and turns they had experienced since then, Noriko and Kengo had safely tied the knot, and Kengo had become the son-in-law of the Momokawa family. At the beginning of this year, the long-awaited first child, Kiyoshi, was born to the Momokawa couple.

Since then, Inako had persistently persuaded Jin'emon to allow her to work in the sake brewery. Of course, the seriousness of learning the job was extraordinary, and she struggled daily under Jin'emon's scolding , but she had finally started to get the hang of it recently.

Jin'emon still maintained his strict attitude, but according to Noriko said, every time Inako managed to complete a task at the brewery, the smoke from the tobacco he smoked at home swayed more than usual.

Zenshokuji 's Enki and Kei , as well as Hōrai 's Buddhist supplies store, Bunshichi , are also doing well. Occasionally, Inako visits them, and each time they welcome her as if she were family.

Saki is still taking care of Stewart. When Inako was able to start working at the brewery, Saki floated a boat on the inner lake and served her sake in small bottles with lids, accompanied by fried chicken.

I heard that Stewart's architectural work is on track, and he is designing several buildings in Osaka.

Speaking of Osaka, last month—still during the Meiji era, Tennotennō Temple ji was said to have a tower built in the image of the French Eiffel Tower and Arc de Triomphe on the site of the National Industrial Exhibition. Inako has not yet seen it in person, but surely, as its name suggests, it must be a tall tower that reaches the heavens.

Now, it has become easy to go to Osaka thanks to the Keihan Electric Railway, which opened two years ago. Two months ago, the width of Shijo Street was expanded, and the Kyoto City Tram began to operate.

And just yesterday, the Keishin Electric Railway opened, running along the Biwa Lake Sosui between Sanjo and Otsu Fudanotsuji . In the end, the canal boats were not electrified, meaning one of the predictions in the Electric Catalog did not come true. I wonder if he would regret it, or if he would be pleased to see how electricity is making the world more convenient.

I wonder what he is doing now. I still have not been shown that phantasmagoria called 'The Electric Catalog of the 20th Century.'

"Hey, was there a torii-shaped fire sending in a place like that?"

Inako, lost in thought, was drawn to the voice of a passenger and looked out the window, where a light in the shape of a torii was rising near Inari. I have never heard of a fire sending in Fushimi.

In the bustling train, Inako felt something in that light that made her think, "Could it be...?"

"Sorry, big sister. I'm getting off at the next stop, so could you go ahead?"

Noriko, soothing Kiyo, replied softly, "I understand," with a gentle smile .

"Inako-kun, be careful," Kengo said with a smile glimmering at his lips.

When I transferred trains and arrived at Inari Shrine, I ran up the approach to Akuhiko Daimeijin's mound.

“After all, it was the light of the electric lamp .”

In front of the shrine, a large torii-shaped wooden frame was erected, with electric lamps installed without gaps.

Under such a dazzling torii, a young man was standing.

With unkempt hair that had grown out from a shaved head, and a kimono with sleeves that peeked out, he wore hakama .

“──Kihachi-san?”

Noticing Inako's voice, the young man turned around.

“...Kinako-san?”

With a blank expression, Yajirō stood there. Realizing who it was, Inako felt a sense of relief. Although she occasionally met Yajirō, they resembled each other so much that she sometimes mistook him for someone else.

“Inako-san,” “It really is you,” said the three former students of the Night School Association , Ito, Mitsu, and Sadakichi , who had gathered from somewhere. They all had grown into fine-looking individuals.

“After consulting with the shrine priest, we decided to try making a fire using the electric lamp . We gave it a shot as a test.”

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” everyone said in unison.

Inako looked up at the torii again. It shone powerfully, and it might even be visible from the moon.

“If Kihachi-san had come back from Canada, he could have seen it too.”

“Canada?” Yajiro tilted his head curiously .

“You know, he went to Canada as a monk. I wonder how much longer we have to wait for him to come back.”

As the members of the night school exchanged confused glances, Yajiro spoke up, “Kinako-san.”

“The one who went to Canada is Yosuke .”

According to Yajiro, Yosuke, who was dismissed as branch manager, was sent to Zenshokuji for training on the instructions of Saki after learning about the recruitment of monks in Canada, and was sent to Canada after a few months. From what I hear, he is now somewhat fitting into life over there, even though he is being pushed around by the followers .

“We still have to talk to the head priest, so we’ll take our leave. Take your time looking around.”

Leaving Inako, who was still trying to sort out her thoughts, Yajiro and the others went deeper into the approach.

Under the light of the electric lamp, Inako took out a photo taken with Hachiman from her drawstring bag. It's a photo of Kihachi and Inako standing side by side, looking tense. I wonder where he is now, as he turns his face away in the picture.

“Look, isn’t it beautiful?”

When I turned around at the voice from behind, under the electric light stood a young man.

His hair was neatly cut, and he was wearing an unfamiliar school uniform from top to bottom.

“……Kihachi, is that you…?”

Kihachi, who had grown quite tall and had a dignified face, smiled and said, “Keep it up.”

“What have you been doing all this time?”

“I was fulfilling my contract with Jin'emon.”

Jin'emon, who required that the person marrying Inako be at least a university graduate, refused to acknowledge any refunds and imposed a contract on Kihachi to “show that he could advance to university.” During his studies, to ensure that he wouldn’t get distracted by Inako, he even went so far as to transfer him to a middle school in Tokyo.

“Look at this high school uniform. Once you get into high school, you can advance to university without any exams.”

Kihachi poked at the fabric of the uniform with delight , but he became anxious when Inako didn’t say anything.

“Well... I'm sorry, I couldn't contact you at all.”

Inako took out the electrical catalog and said, “It's number twenty-one in the catalog.”

“I also felt the electric current when I met Kihachi.”

Kihachi's anxious eyes gradually widened.

“Because Kihachi sent the electric current, I was able to smile.”

Kihachi had a complex expression, looking like he was about to cry and laugh at the same time,

and said with a flushed face, “I came back safely as promised.”

“I want you to always be my god from now on.”

“...Are you stupid?”

“W-Who's stupid?”

“If we’re going to be together forever, I’d prefer a wife over a god.”

Kihachi opened his mouth in surprise, but with a bittersweet smile in his tearful eyes, he gently combed the hair of Inako with his outstretched hand, and Inako placed her hand over his.

"Your hair is still like it was in the twentieth century. The white kasuri kimono suits you well,"

"Of course. It's the hair and kimono that you praised, Kihachi-san."

"...I've kept you waiting for five years. Thank you for waiting all this time."

Inako smiled, recalling the smile that Kihachi once said was cute.

“Believing is my strong point.”

And Kihachi also smiled, his face crumpling with joy.

"I believed too."

Afterword

It was probably when I was in high school that I first watched an anime by Kyoto Animation.

Until then, I had the impression that anime was made somewhere far away, so I remember feeling a sense of familiarity with the word "Kyoto." Now, to think that I can have my story published by the very studio that is Kyoto Animation feels like a dream.

Including my teenage years, there was a time when I couldn't do what others could do easily, had no interest in what those around me found enjoyable, and was always lost in my own fantasies, suffering from not being able to be normal.

If I continued like this, I would end up as a strange person with a fantasy obsession. When I thought that far, I decided that if I couldn't be normal, I would challenge the world with my strange aspects and started creating stories.

Later, when a novel I wrote for friends was described as "too blue," instead of fixing it, I smiled and thought, "This is something only I can do right now, so I will delve into that blueness." When I applied with this work set in the Meiji era, my desire to challenge myself was stronger than my worry about "causing a category error." I was more curious about what kind of reaction I would get for sending such a story.

Now, regarding this work, the model for the shrine that does not open exists in reality. I packed in everything I wanted to convey, including things I have actually seen and heard, and things I faced again. I wonder how you all received this story. I would be happy if something, even a little, stayed in your hearts.

As we pass the halfway point, I would like to express my gratitude to those who have supported me up to this point.

First, to my parents. Thank you for raising me, who was always lost in fantasies, to this point. My father is someone who never shows weakness, and his strong will has always been a great help. My mother, even when work and house chores were tough, supported our family and those in need without a single grimace.

I can't say it to your face, but I am proud to have been born as one of your two children.

And my older brother, who has been my playmate since childhood and has always taken care of me. Grandma.

Relatives who tell me stories about our ancestors (I'm sorry for always receiving vegetables and sweets). Cousins, seniors, and friends.

My friends from a certain school in Osaka, who are still a strong support for me.

Mr. M, who read my manuscript multiple times before I applied and encouraged me with warm words.

Mr. H, who gave me the opportunity to reconsider my work with sharp and calm advice before applying.

The editor who delved into my work repeatedly and faced it with persistence.
worked hard
The people involved who for me. Lastly, to Kihachi and Inako, who brought me this far.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone.

Well then, I will continue to make small progress so that we can meet again through some connection.

Yuki Hiro

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